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BY ROY ROCKWOOD.



"HI! HI! STOP THAT BOY! STOP THE THIEF!" YELLED THE GUARDIAN OF THE PEACE.

FLYER FRED, THE CYCLIST FERRET; OR, RUNNING DOWN THE ROUGH AND READY RASCALS.

BY ROY ROCKWOOD.

CHAPTER I.

THE RIGHT OF THE ROAD.

"Get out of my way, you little runt, or I'll run you down!"

"You get out of the way yourself, Caleb Darston! I am on the right side of the road."

"Don't talk back to me, Fred Farley, or I'll jump off of my machine and give you the thrashing you deserve."

As the big boy spoke he slowed up on his nickel-plated and highly-polished bicycle and glared wrathfully at the smaller youth, who, poorly dressed, was driving several cows along the country road.

"I don't deserve any thrashing, and, even if I did, you are not large enough to give it to me," was the undaunted response, and the smaller youth stopped short and allowed the cows to go on.

With something very much like an oath, Caleb Darston, the son of the richest lawyer in Cclumna county, stopped short and hopped down to the ground. Leaning his bicycle against a rock, he made a dart toward Fred Farley, his fists clenched and a wicked look in his cold gray eyes.

But the blow he aimed at Fred's head did not land. Instead, the long arm sawed through the empty air, and the bully, for Caleb was nothing less, was nearly taken from his feet.

"You—you hound!" he spluttered, upon recovering. "I'll teach you a thing or two before I'm done with you. See if I don't."

Again he rushed at Fred, who retreated slowly before him.

"See here, Caleb Darston, if you get licked in this fight it will be your own fault."

"If I get licked!" roared the bully. "Ho! ho! if that ain't good! Why, there won't be a spot on your little body that's not black and blue before I get done with you!"

There was another wild rush, and this time Caleb Darston managed to catch Fred sideways upon the left arm.

Scarcely had the blow landed than Fred drew back. Then that little right fist was doubled up into a lump as hard almost as a rock. Like lightning it shot out, taking Caleb squarely upon the face.

The bully staggered back, until, hitting his heel against a stone, he fell flat in the dust of the road.

"Oh! oh! My nose is broke!" he screamed. "You—you hit me with a rock!"

"No, I hit you only with my bare fist—and I'll do it again unless you promise to leave me alone," retorted Fred. "I was on the right side of the road and minding my own business, and you had no right to pitch into me."

"I'll have you locked up!"

"All right; go ahead. In the meantime, have you had enough? If not, I'll see if I can't accommodate you a little more."

"Don't you dare to hit me again! I'll—I'll—shoot you!"

As he uttered the words he sprang up and put his hand into the hip pocket of his knickerbockers. Fred thought he

was uttering an idle threat, but the small pearl-mounted pistol flashed in the bright sunshine undecieved him.

"Now, then, Fred Farley, down on your knees and beg my pardon, or I'll pull the trigger on you!"

Fred did not budge; neither did a spark of color leave his manly face. His breast heaved a trifle, but it was not through fear.

"Want me to get right down here in the dust?" was asked, half quizzically.

"Yes; right down there in the dust, you little poorhouse runt!"

"Can't do it. I might soil my best Sunday-go-to-meetin's."

"Down I say, and be quick about it! I'll give you until I count ten. One, two, three, four—owou!"

Caleb never finished his counting. The country boy took one leap with the quickness of a panther, landing on his shoulder. The pistol went off, but the bullet sang through the air above. Then the weapon was knocked from the nervous hand and sent sailing over the bushes which lined the road into the wheat field beyond.

"Now, then, Caleb Darston, take that for your impudence!" cried Fred, and without ceremony he delivered two stinging blows, causing Caleb's teeth to rattle in his head.

"If you ever attack me again, I'll—I'll finish you!" was all Fred then said, and Caleb stood by the worm fence, holding to the rails for support. "And, another thing, don't you ever dare to call me a poorhouse runt again. It is true I came from the Grainville poorhouse, but I didn't go there of my own free will; it was your father who forced me into that institution after my father had been killed on the railroad."

"Oh, shut up!" growled Caleb. It was the most he dared say.

"I will, now I am done. But pay heed to my words, Caleb Darston, or it will be the worse for you. Now I must go after the cows, and, as they have gone further than they should because of you, I'll borrow your bicycle to bring them back. I'll leave the machine up at Moore's Corners."

Thus speaking, Fred ran to the bicycle and mounted it.

"Hi! come back! Don't go off on my new machine!" yelled Caleb, but Fred was already out of hearing.

"Gosh, but the beggar rides well!" muttered the bully, as he watched Fred's progress in amazement. "Where did he get a chance to learn? Moore's Corners. That's a half mile to walk, and in the hot sun. Curse him! I'll get square for this, mark my word! I'll make it my business to make him wish he never was born!"

CHAPTER II.

FRED GETS INTO MORE HOT WATER.

"I knew I would have to have it out with him sooner or later," said the boy to himself, as he pedaled rapidly down the dusty road in the direction the cows had taken. "He has tried to lord it over me too long. Now I reckon we are quits, with maybe the balance just a trifle in my favor."

And Fred smiled to himself, as he jammed his old straw hat down tight on his curly head and "let himself out," as the saying goes.

Fred Farley was an orphan, his mother having died when he was a mere baby and his father having been killed on the railroad at Grainville two years previous to the opening of our tale.

At the time of his death Mr. Richard

Farley was supposed to have been rich, but it was not long after that Ezra Darston, the lawyer, and Caleb's father, announced that there was nothing coming to Fred out of the estate.

The astonished youth had been sent to the poorhouse, much against his wish, and soon after the lawyer had had him bound out to Uriah Whop, the most close-fisted and hard-hearted farmer in the county.

"You're big enough to work for your living; the county don't intend to keep you in idleness," was the way Ezra Darston put it, and Fred was sent to Uriah Whop's large farm.

However, Fred would rather work than be an object of charity; so he did not complain at the change. But life on the Whop farm was hard and tiresome, and he often longed for a change. Uriah Whop and his miserly wife both got all they could out of the lad, and scolded continually.

"I'd just like to take this wheel and ride about 'steen miles away from the Grainville district," murmured Fred, as he bowled along over the smooth road. "Wouldn't a life on the wheel be just glorious, though! A fellow could go and come whenever he pleased, with no cows to look after, no hay to cut, no garden to weed, and no hot sauce from that Tartar and her husband."

At last the fork in the road known as Moore's Corners was reached, and Fred dismounted and left the bicycle against a tree.

As the boy drew close to the place he heard a loud yelling coming from the direction of the barn. It was old Uriah Whop having a lively time of it with Bess, his fiery little mare.

"Whoa! whoa!" he screamed. "Whoa, Bess, darn ye! Stand still, or I'll crack yer head open fer ye!"

But the mare was on her mettle, and, with a lively lifting of her hind hoofs, she swept out of the barn and came tearing, toward Fred.

"Stop her! stop her!" roared the old farmer, waving his bony arms wildly in the air. "Do ye hear, ye good-fer-nuthing? Stop her!" Fred heard, and ran toward the mare. But she was nimble and on her guard, and swished to one side of the barnyard in a twinkling.

"Hang ye! If ye don't stop her, I'll skin ye! Wot do I feed ye fer, if ye can't stop a mare like thet?"

The mare was making for the gateway. Fred made a couple of leaps. He arrived there side by side with the excited animal; a bound took him up on her back, and away they went, helter-skelter, down a side road, the boy doing the bareback act in a way that would have put many a circus performer to shame.

In vain he tried to stop the mare, and mile after mile was covered, until the last of the farmhouses in that section was left far behind. Then, with a crazy little turn, the mare plunged into a growth of stickery bushes and came to an abrupt halt.

Had the boy not been on his guard, he would have been thrown over the animal's head. But he was up to her tricks, and clung fast. Slipping a stout cord he had in his pocket over her head, he held fast and awaited the horse's further action.

Bess was really now tired out, and seemed quite ready to return, but it was well past sundown when boy and mare arrived again in sight of the old farmhouse.

"Come back, have ye!" growled Uriah, who was on the watch by the

horse block. "Ye took yer time about it, didn't ye?"

"She went half way to Coalton."

"I don't believe ye. Go on in to yer supper; it's been a-waitin' long enough. I'll take her to the barn."

Fred passed over the end of the cord and dismounted. The greeting was no more than he had anticipated from old Whop, so he made no comment. He walked into the dingy kitchen, illuminated by a solitary tallow candle stuck in a tin holder.

"You'll git no supper to-night, young man!" cried Mrs. Whop, a sour-looking woman of uncertain age. "The table's been cleared off this hour ago."

"I had to go after Bess—"

"Drat ye! don't talk back ter me, ye good-fer-nuthin'! Off to bed with ye, or I'll git Uriah ter dust yer jacket ter make ye sleep extry well!"

And, seeing he did not immediately clear out, she went for her favorite weapon, the broom.

"I'm going to have something to eat, Mrs. Whop. I didn't have half breakfast and dinner enough, and I'm not going to bed supperless."

"What, Fred Farley! Ye dare ter talk back ter me! Take that! And that!"

The broom came down once, hitting the back of a chair. Then it came down twice as heavy.

Crash! jingle! jingle! jingle!

The end of the broom had struck the window, breaking the sash and half a dozen panes of glass. A howl of intense rage and anguish arose on the night air.

"Oh, you rat! You good-fer-nuthin' imp! See what you've done!"

"It wasn't me; it was you, Mrs. Whop."

"No sech thing! Four panes of glass broken to flinders an' all acause o' you! I'll skin ye alive!"

Again she began an onslaught. Seeing she was in a perfect frenzy, and not wishing to defend himself against her, Fred backed toward the open doorway—to fall plump into the outstretched arms of old Uriah.

"Hi! hi! wot's this? Who broke the winder?"

"It was his fault, Uriah!" shrieked his wife, pointing at Fred. "Give him yer whip!"

"Thet I will, Mirandy!" ejaculated the unfeeling farmer. "He let the mare git all scratched most ter deth! Ye young villain! Ye did it a-purpose, ye can't deny it!"

Uriah had in his hand a heavy cowhide whip. Throwing the youth from him, he raised the instrument of torture on high and brought it down on the boy's back.

He had no time to hit out again. Madened by the way he was being treated, Fred arose to the occasion. Rushing at the farmer, he tripped him up and wrenched the whip from his hands.

"That's the last time you shall have a chance to abuse me!" cried the boy, with dark, flashing eyes. "And take that to remember me by!"

The whip came down across Uriah's face, leaving a blood-red mark behind. Then the cowhide went sailing out of the broken window, and the lad marched for the yard.

"Ye rascal! Come back! Where are ye goin'?" howled Uriah.

"I won't come back—never! I'm going to make my own way after this, Uriah Whop."

"I'll skin ye alive!"

"You'll not touch me again—except at your peril. From this moment on I intend to be own master!"

And, having thus delivered himself, Fred ran out of the dooryard and up the road into the fast-gathering darkness.

"Oh, Uriah!" wailed Mrs. Whop. "Wot shall we do? Do ye think he'll really stay away?"

"I dunno, drat him!" Whop's brow darkened; then, of a sudden, it cleared and a look of deep cunning came into his toughened face. "Hope he does stay away, Mirandy! I'll have a chance then ter strike Ezra Darston fer my share o' the money his father left him!"

What did the miserly old farmer mean?

CHAPTER III.

"THAT BOY IS A THIEF!"

When Fred left the farm behind he had no idea where he was bound, excepting the fact that henceforth he intended to make his own way in the world.

"Good-by to that miserable place forever!" he murmured, as he hurried on, his hands in his pockets, in one of which jingled his entire capital, seventeen cents. "I'm not rich, not by a jugful, but I'll eat dirt before I'll go back to that flint-hearted couple!"

And he went on, until even the flickering light from the parlor lamp disappeared from view.

Two miles were passed ere he paused to catch his breath. He listened to ascertain if he was being followed, but only the cry of the night birds and the humming of insects and the croaking of tree toads broke the stillness.

"Reckon old Whop thought it was no use to try to catch me," he said to himself, with a grim smile. "Now, the question is, how much further shall I go to-night, and where shall I put up? Pell's roadhouse is three miles further on, but seventeen cents won't pay for more than a shakedown in one of the horse-stalls. I imagine I had better put up at some free Hotel De Barn about here."

He hurried on a distance of half a mile and turned into a side road, where he knew he would find a barn, with several other buildings, which had not been used for years.

"Help! help! help!"

Fred stopped short as the piercing cry rent the night air. From whence had come the unexpected appeal for assistance?

"Stop yer jaw, old man!" came in angry tones. "Stop it, I say!"

"If yer don't hush yer mug, we'll gag yer!" put in a second voice.

Fred now recognized the direction from which the voices came.

"They are in the old barn," he thought, and, without stopping to think, he dashed forward, picking up a couple of stones on his way.

The building was in the midst of a clump of bushes, and as the youth stepped through an opening he saw a sight that thrilled him to the heart.

On a board placed over a couple of boxes lay a helpless old man, with his feet bound fast under him. Over the old man stood two dirty and hideous-looking tramps, each with a drawn club upraised.

A farm lantern lit up the scene, and, as it did not cast its rays beyond the barn, the boy did not hesitate to draw closer.

"Wha—what would you do with me?" pleaded the old man. "I have nothing—absolutely nothing."

"We're goin' ter search yer!" growled one of the tramps.

"I have nothing—"

"Shet up! We wouldn't take yer oath on a stack o' Bibles, see?"

As he spoke the tramp shoved his hand

into the old man's vest pocket and brought forth a thin package done up in brown paper.

"Ha! thought yer said yer didn't have nuthin'!"

"'Tis only a picture of my wife, who died twelve years ago!"

"We'll see!" and the tramp ripped the package open.

"Please—" began the old man, pleadingly.

"Here are the tramps, boys! This way, and we'll bag 'em both! Lively, now, and charge on the barn from this side!"

The cry and command from without came as a thunderclap from a clear sky to the dirty vagabonds. They sprang back in alarm.

"The cops from the town!"

"Put out that glim, Wobby!"

Again came the cry, from another direction, and in what sounded like a deeper tone. Thoroughly frightened, the tramps put out the lantern. Then, as something struck the side of the barn loud and clear, both gave a yell and ran for a rear opening.

As he saw the tramps scamper as though their lives depended upon it, Fred could scarcely keep from laughing outright. He continued to call out, in several different voices, and threw small stones through the brush, which, in their alarm, the tramps took for the clips of bullets.

Returning to the barn, Fred struck a match and lit the lantern. The old man stared at him in bewilderment.

"Where are the police?" he asked, falteringly.

"I'm all there is of 'em," returned the youth, with a broad grin. "Say, they got out in great shape, didn't they?"

The old man broke into a chuckle.

"Very good! Very good, indeed, son! You routed them in superb shape, I must say. And now will you do me the kindness to release my legs? I am decidedly cramped."

Fred drew his pocket-knife and cut the old man's bonds, which were tied in several hard knots. The stranger stood up and gave a long stretch.

"Richard is himself once more," he cried, dramatically. "Free once more to roam the fresh green fields! Free to—"

"Cut it short, stranger."

"I will, son, I will! But, know you not that in days gone by Booth Harkins was a great actor? Many the night I filled the opera house from pit to dome."

"Good enough, but—" Fred's eyes fell upon a half-open bundle from which part of a loaf of bread protruded. "I'm hungry, and if you want to pay me back for what I've done for you—"

"To be sure, son, to be sure. One good turn deserves another, as Shakespeare said to Napoleon at the battle of Bunker's Hill when the Dutchmen were flying across the bay for their lives. Help yourself to such as I have, and welcome."

The youth lost no time in opening the bundle. In it he found, besides the bread, some crackers and cheese and smoked beef, as well as a jelly roll, and, being half-starved, he filled up without delay.

"Whither bound, son?" asked the man.

"Nowhere in particular; everywhere in general."

"Ah, indeed! Then we travel the dusty path of life hand in hand."

"I'm not traveling any more to-night. If it's all the same to you, we'll bunk here until morning."

He selected a corner on a pile of old hay and made himself as comfortable as possible. Booth Harkins also laid down, and soon the pair were sound in slumber.

When Fred awoke the sun was shining through the cracks of the boards. For a second he could not remember where he was, and almost imagined old Uriah standing by, whip in hand, ready to make him hustle. Then he recollected all that had happened.

"No more Uriah Whop and his wife Mirandy for me," he said, half aloud, and looked around for Booth Harkins.

The old ex-actor was gone.

Fred ran out of the barn and made a search. It was useless; the old half-crazy individual had disappeared.

The road he had taken led through the village of Coalton, and six miles further on was the thriving city of Brights-burgh. For the latter place Fred determined to strike out.

"I wouldn't mind getting a lift," he thought, while on the road; and, soon after, a loaded hay-rick coming along, he sprang on behind, and thus got a free ride as far as Coalton.

After leaving Coalton he found the way hot and dusty. A mile out, feeling thirsty, he stepped down to where a tiny brook ran, and was about to stoop for a drink when something but a few yards away attracted his attention.

That something glistened in the sunlight from a mass of bushes as though it was a bar of silver. Leaping across the brook, the next moment Fred had dragged from its unique resting place one of the finest bicycles he had ever beheld.

The part of the wheel which lay upon the earth was slightly rusted, but the other shone as bright as ever. On making an examination, he saw that one of the pedals of the machine was badly bent; but, despite the twisted pedal, it could still be ridden, and, hopping into the saddle, he pedaled on his way.

"If nobody comes forward to claim this wheel, I'll be right in it," he thought. "It's a splendid machine, and no mistake!" and he let himself out for a spurt that sent the blood tingling through every vein.

Thus mounted, the distance to Brights-burgh seemed a short one, and it lacked quarter of an hour of twelve when he spun onto the main street, lined with stores.

"Hi! hi! Stop, boy, stop!"

It was a policeman who called to him, and, much against his will, the rider was compelled to halt.

"I want to look at that bicycle for a minute."

"All right; go ahead."

The policeman eyed the wheel critically; then gazed at the name and the number.

"I thought so, youngster, when first I clapped eyes onto it," he said, sternly. "You just come with me."

"What for?"

"For stealing this machine!"

"I didn't steal it."

"It won't do you any good to deny it, youngster. Come with me, and bring the bicycle along."

"I found this machine."

"That's an old gag, boy, and it don't work. Come on, I say!"

"Who says I stole this machine? Who does it belong to?"

"It belongs to a man named Brycomb Arlington. You stole it from the Landown Hotel four days ago."

"I haven't been in Brightsburgh for six months."

"Well, you can tell your story at the station house. Come on."

Thus speaking, the policeman caught the boy by the coat collar, that he might not escape.

Fred began to think rapidly. He did not doubt but what the bicycle had been stolen, and perhaps abandoned by the thief when the pedal broke. The trouble was, he was in no situation to prove his innocence. He had no friend in Brights-burgh, and he felt that if once taken to the station house matters would go hard with him.

"I am innocent, and I won't go to jail!" he burst out, and with a dexterous twist he loosened the policeman's grip and sprang away.

"Hi! hi! Stop that boy! Stop the thief!" yelled the guardian of the peace. The cry was soon taken up on all sides.

"Stop the thief!"

"What did he steal?"

"There he goes!"

"My, but isn't he a scorcher!"

CHAPTER IV.

A DASH FOR LIBERTY.

Down the thoroughfare went the mob of men and boys, with Fred leading them by not more than a hundred feet.

The youth was a flyer, but so were some of his pursuers, and gradually a couple of men began to gain on him.

Coming to a corner, the boy darted around it, crossed the way, and entered the hallway of a tenement house.

A rear door was open, and he ran straight through, emerging into a small courtyard, blocked on all sides by high brick walls.

Realizing he had made a fatal mistake, he attempted to turn back, but the leader of the pursuing party had already gained the hallway, so escape in that direction was cut off.

Fred gazed around him. Close at hand was a cellar door. Opening this, he descended a flight of dirty stone steps, closing the door after him.

The cellar was dark and filled with rubbish. As Fred reached the front end of the place a deep groan startled him.

"Water, for the love of heaven, water!" croaked a voice. "Give me a drink and chase away the rats!"

Fred had reached a partition which divided a living apartment from the foulness beyond. Passing through a half-rotted doorway, he found himself beside the pallet of one of the most hideous women he had ever beheld.

"Water! water!" she moaned. "And chase away the rats!"

A pitcher stood on the other side of the room, on the ledge of a window, and he passed her this. She drank eagerly.

"Good boy! good boy!" croaked the old woman, as she ceased to drink. "Good boy to give old Mammy Quay a drink. Wot's yer name?"

"Fred Farley."

"Ha! Fred Farley! The son of Richard Farley?"

"Yes."

"And where is Ezra Darston now?" went on the old woman, with a piercing glance of her glassy eyes.

"Ezra Darston? What has he to do with me and my father?"

"Everything, Frederick—everything! The devil take him! It was Ezra Darston that did it! Villain! Liar! Perjurer!"

"Did what?"

"He knows—and so do I. Beware of him, Fred; beware of him, I say!"

"Why?"

"He is your enemy, that's why. When I am well, maybe I'll tell you more, but not now—not now. If he—ha! what's that?"

The old woman paused and essayed to raise herself up on the pallet.

A tramping was heard in the rear. The cellar door was raised, and half a dozen searchers came down.

"He must have come this way!"

"Light a lantern, somebody!"

"The police! They are after me!" whispered Fred. "Good-by! Perhaps I'll see you again."

"The police! What have you done?" queried Mammy Quay.

"Nothing wrong," replied the lad.

There was no time to say more, for the pursuers were approaching the doorway through which he had entered.

Looking around, Fred saw a passageway leading to the front stairs, and, running for this, he at once mounted to the ground floor, to find himself in a side hallway.

There was a window at the rear, and it was open.

He approached the opening and started to jump out.

"I have you now, my laddy buck!"

It was an Irish bluecoat!

As Fred came down on the pavement the policeman caught him by the arm; a club was raised, and the boy received a blow on the head that partly stunned him.

"You brute!" he gasped, upon recovering. "Don't hit me again!"

"Arrah now, kape quoit, or I'll give give it ye worse, so I will!"

The Irish guardian of the peace called to his companions, and in a few minutes the other bluecoat was at hand, as well as the balance of the crowd which had followed.

To prevent further trouble, Fred was handcuffed, and both policemen escorted him to the station house, while an interested citizen trundled the machine that had caused all of the trouble.

The hearing was a short one.

"What have you to say to the charge?" asked the magistrate.

"I found the machine, just as I said before," replied the accused.

"Where is Brycomb Arlington?"

"Please, Your Honor, he has left Brightsburgh, and won't be back until next week," said one of the officers of the court.

"Then I will hold Frederick Farley until his return. I will fix bail at five hundred dollars. Farley, do you want to go out with a constable and hunt up a bondsman?"

"At five hundred dollars? Not exactly, sir! I couldn't find one for five hundred cents, I'm afraid."

There was a ripple of laughter at this. "Farley, where do you belong?"

"Nowhere."

"You are, then, a tramp?"

"Hardly; I'm on a tramp."

"It amounts to the same thing. Remove him to his cell."

Without further words, the boy was conducted from the courtroom. The jail was in the rear, and he was marched to the last cell on one of the side corridors.

"Now make yourself perfectly at home," said the keeper, as he shoved the youth inside and locked the heavy iron door.

"Thanks, awfully!" drawled Fred. "Just the best kind of a place to do that in," and he gazed at the single wooden bench and the whitewashed walls philosophically.

For the first time in his life, Fred found himself a prisoner of the law. Many another boy would have broken down over the trying situation, but he was made of sterner stuff; as a matter of fact, he was not even thinking of his imprisonment.

Mammy Quay's words rang in his ears. "Beware of Ezra Darston!"

What could those words mean?

Fred was destined to find out ere long.

"I'll hunt her up again as soon as I get out of this fix," was his mental resolve, as he started to walk up and down the narrow cell, in his nervousness.

"I wish I could escape," he thought. "Hang it all, I wonder if there isn't some way to get out?"

At the end of the cell was a narrow window, and across it ran three slender iron bars.

Getting up on the bench, the boy examined the bars one at a time, and, to his joy, found one of them loose at one end; while both of the others were decidedly shaky.

He easily wrenched the first bar away; then, using that as a pry, he broke away those which remained.

He looked out of the opening thus made.

Beyond was the prison yard, surrounded by a tall iron fence.

Would escape from the cell lead to liberty?

"I'll try it!" he decided, and prepared to crawl through the opening.

CHAPTER V.

HOT WORDS AND BLOWS.

As Fred gained the window sill he paused.

There was a sound outside, and he saw several keepers walk into the prison yard.

They were not over five yards away, and he held his breath as he drew back; but, they were on their way to the courtroom, and soon passed out of sight and hearing.

Fred waited until he felt certain the coast was once more clear, and then crawled into the opening again.

Not a soul in sight.

He knew he was taking a great risk. If discovered and brought back the authorities would punish him for trying to escape, even if he proved himself innocent concerning the stolen bicycle.

He lowered himself from the window and dropped upon the grass below.

Like a cat he scurried to the fence, drew himself to the top, stepped over the sharp iron points, and made a clean leap into the street.

"Stop!"

Crack!

It was the report of a pistol.

At the last moment a keeper had seen him.

The bullet from the pistol sang past the boy's ear, causing his heart to leap into his throat.

But, he did not falter. A covered wagon was passing at the time, the horse on a run, and he sprang on behind.

The driver of the wagon did not notice the lad. He appeared to be in a tremendous hurry, and drove along faster than ever.

From the spot he had left Fred heard the deep notes of the jail bell, announcing the news that a prisoner had escaped.

On and on went the wagon, which just suited the emergency.

From the main street they passed into a side street, and then out upon a country road leading down to Briarwood,

which was upon the north shore of a beautiful mountain lake.

Presently something caused the driver of the wagon to gaze around.

"Hullo, what are you doing there?" he called out, angrily.

"Catching a lift!"

"I'll catch you with a whip!" howled the driver.

He was an ugly looking man, with a fierce red mustache, a fiery beard, and a red scar on his ear.

"Don't be hard on a chap," said Fred.

The driver caught up the whip, and was about to lean back in the wagon when he suddenly paused in amazement.

"By gosh!" he ejaculated. "Ain't you the chap that was arrested for stealing that bicycle?"

"I don't look as if I was under arrest for anything, do I?" replied Fred, somewhat nettled by the driver's discovery.

"I'll bet a new hat you're the same cute little rascal. If you are, come up on the seat; I won't hurt you!"

"Thanks! I'm all right here," thinking the fellow might play him some trick.

"I won't touch you. It wasn't a square shake of that policeman, to my way of thinking. Come up on the seat!"

Thus urged, Fred took a seat beside the fellow, who speedily introduced himself as Bob Bolten. Something about Bolten Fred distrusted, so he kept his eyes wide open.

"You look like a likely lad. Where do you belong?"

"Anywhere I happen to be."

"And your handle?"

"You can call me Fred."

"Ah, ain't givin' yourself away, I see," and Bob Bolten closed one eye suggestively. "All right; that goes! Say, do you want a job?"

"What doing?"

"It won't be hard work. See that box in the back there, under the cloth?"

"Yes. It looks like a coffin box."

"You struck it first clip. There is a feller committed suicide over to Briarwood and I'm going to bury the corpse kind of on the quiet, see?"

"What for?"

"The feller ain't got no near relatives, and them as is left behind won't give him no big spread, as it were. They have made all the arrangements, and I'm to get twenty dollars for the job of putting him under up in a private cemetery up the lake road. If you'll help me it will be two dollars in your pocket."

Fred listened with interest. He did not trust Bob Bolten, yet the fellow might be square, and the chance of making two dollars was not to be thrown away.

"When are you going to do the work?" he asked.

"This afternoon, between five and six o'clock, or maybe a little later. I'll know all about it when we get to Briarwood."

"You won't play a game on me, and hand me over to the police?"

"Nixey! What do I care if you took that bike? It is none of my business."

This made Fred more suspicious than ever, but now he was determined to find out what Bob Bolten's little game was. Little did he dream of the startling revelation in store for him!

Briarwood was reached an hour later, and they drove into the yard attached to one of the third-rate hotels.

"Had any dinner?" asked Bolten.

"No."

"All right. Go in and feed up! I'll be with you soon, and will do the paying."

Fred, still suspicious, entered the din-

ing room of the hotel. From a side window he saw Bolten leave the stables and walk to a cottage down a side road.

"Excuse me, I forgot something. I'll be back shortly," said the boy to the waiter, who came up to take his order, and he slid out of the dining room and made after his late companion.

The cottage reached, Bolten went inside.

Skulking along by a number of bushes and trees, Fred managed to reach the side of the building unobserved.

A little window just above his head was open, and from the room beyond came earnest talking.

"We'll be ready for you at six o'clock, Ben," he heard a rough voice say.

"No later than that, Pete?" asked Ben Bolten.

"No later."

"And yer won't have no trouble with him," put in a second rough voice.

"How are you going to work the job, Hank?"

"Just leave that to us."

"Does he suspect anything?"

"Well, if he don't, he's a bigger fool than the boss thinks he is."

At this there was a rude laugh all around.

"Where have you got him now?"

"Down in the milk house."

"Keeping him cool, eh?"

"That's it."

"Will the boss pay the money for the job?"

"If he don't, we'll peach on him," came from the man called Pete.

"That's so; we will."

"He's trying for a big stake, I reckon," observed Bob Bolten.

"Of course."

There was a pause.

"Well, I must get back to the hotel. I've got a boy in tow up there."

"Who's he?"

"A lad I picked up on the road."

"Can you trust him?"

"I reckon I can. He was keeping out of the way of the police for stealing a bicycle when I caught on to him."

"Oh, then he's the stuff, Bob. But, hold up; here are half a dozen letters I want you to read carefully before you go back," cried one of the men.

A rustle of paper and then a dead silence followed.

Fred had listened to the conversation with breathless interest.

What could it all mean?

Were these men going to murder the man to be buried in the private cemetery up the lake road?

It looked like it!

"He must be a prisoner in the milk house," decided the boy. "Where can that be?"

It did not take him long to find out. At the end of the neglected and weed-overgrown garden was a small brook and on its bank was a small, square building of rough stone.

He ran to it and tried the door, only to find it locked with a huge padlock.

"Is any one in there?" he called out through a crack.

In reply he heard a faint murmur and then a knocking.

Fully satisfied now a prisoner was within, he looked about for some means of breaking the door open.

An axe lay by a wood block, and he took it up.

Two sharp strokes on the padlock and it was shivered.

Throwing open the heavy door, he stepped in, to behold, in a far corner a man, his arms tied tightly behind him and his feet doubled up under him.

The man was gagged so tightly that he was almost strangled.

"Heavens!" muttered Fred; and springing forward, he cut the poor fellow's bonds and removed the gag.

Thus liberated, the man was too weak to stand. He gave a gulp or two and sank insensible in Fred's arms.

CHAPTER VI.

A THRILLING RESCUE.

The rescuer realized that no time must be lost. The rascals from the cottage might come down to the milk house at any moment.

He looked out of the door toward the dwelling.

The coast was still clear.

Catching the almost lifeless body up in his strong arms, he walked out of the milk house and crossed the brook.

Here a small woods afforded needed shelter.

He passed into the woods as far as he was able, and laid the body down upon a bed of leaves.

The man was not suffering except from exhaustion, and when Fred fanned him and bathed his face with cold water he came to and attempted to sit up.

"Where—where am I?" he asked, faintly.

"You're safe, sir. Please keep still a while longer, and you'll be all right."

"Those villains meant to take my life!"

"That's about the size of it, sir."

"Where are they?"

"I left them at the cottage. But I reckon they'll be after us soon."

"No doubt. I am very grateful to you, my boy. You shall lose nothing by your bold work."

"That's all right, sir. Better keep still now and try to get back your wind, while I go around and notify the Briarwood police?"

"Good! Where is the cottage?"

Fred told the man, and then set out to skirt the woods and pay a visit to the Briarwood authorities.

He had scarcely gone a quarter of a mile when a loud shouting reached his ears: the rascals at the cottage had discovered that their intended victim had escaped!

Trusting the man would know enough not to expose himself, the boy went on.

Briarwood reached, it was an easy matter to find his way to the local squire's office.

Two constables were on hand, and they willingly agreed to do what they could to bag the would-be murderers.

The three were about to set out, when there was a commotion outside.

A man rode up to the squire's office, his horse covered with foam and dust. Fred gave him one glance, and his heart sank within him.

The fellow was the jailer from the Brightsburgh prison!

"Ha! so here you are!" yelled the officer, and pulling his pistol he aimed it at the boy's head. "Surrender, or I will fire!"

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated the squire. "What does this mean, Mason?"

"It means, your honor, that this is one of our prisoners who escaped but two hours ago."

"You don't mean it?"

"I do, your honor. I fancied he had come in this direction. Stand still, boy, or I will shoot!"

"I'm standing still, so don't tear your shirt!" suggested the boy, complacently.

Soon Fred was again a prisoner.

"Who knows but what he was giving us a fake about those men at that cottage?" suggested one of the Briarwood constables. "He's a corker, that boy!"

"It will be a fizzle for you if you don't hurry," replied Fred, sharply. "Do you imagine those men are going to stand still to be captured?"

"See here, jail bird: your little sell won't work with us. We don't go out on no fool's chase," said one of the constables.

"Them's my sentiments, too," added the other.

Fred was more than indignant, but could do nothing.

He asked that Bob Bolten's wagon and horse be taken into custody but even this was denied.

The jailer from Brightsburgh, tired from his hard riding, determined to rest for an hour or two before returning with his prisoner.

Even the squire disbelieved Fred's story. All thought the boy was making up a tale to suit his own purpose.

At last the jailer was rested, and announced his intention of going back.

"You'll ride on the horse with me," he said to his prisoner. "And if you try any monkey shines I'll shoot you as dead as a door nail."

Handcuffed, as he was, Fred was placed on the horse's back; then the jailer mounted on behind.

The start was made for Brightsburgh, and the horse had just reached the end of the block when, looking up a side road, Fred saw a sight that caused his heart to leap with something akin to joy.

"Hullo there!" he shouted, in a voice they started the jailer.

"Stop that! Don't you dare yell for help, youngster, or I'll—"

"Say, come this way, please!" went on the boy.

He was calling to a man who was limping along painfully, his clothing torn and covered with dirt.

It was the man he had saved and left in the woods!

"What! what!" cried the man, as he came up. "What's the meaning of this? I thought you were going for the police?"

"I did go, but I was collared by this officer from Brightsburgh."

"And did the police go after the gang?"

"No; they would not believe my story."

"The fools! And this man is going to take you to Brightsburgh. What for?"

Fred explained.

"For stealing Brycomb Arlington's bicycle? Boy, do you know who I am?"

"No, sir; haven't the least idea."

"I am Brycomb Arlington!"

"You are!" exclaimed Fred, in amazement.

"I am, and I'll vouch for it that you didn't take the machine."

"He didn't?" put in the jailer.

"No, he didn't!"

"Maybe you know who did take it," continued the officer, sarcastically.

"I do! It was Pete Whipple, one of the gang who intended to murder me. I learned of it only last night."

The jailer looked crestfallen. He had heard of Mr. Brycomb Arlington, a wealthy man, who owned considerable coal lands in the vicinity.

"I'm mighty glad to hear you speak as you do, Mr. Arlington," avowed Fred. "It will be the means of getting me out of a heap of trouble."

"I am sorry you have suffered so, my boy. It's a shame, and after you have done so much to save me from the fate those villains set for me. But, there is

no time to talk now. They must be captured, if possible."

Urged by Brycomb Arlington, the Brightsburgh jailer returned to the squire's office. Here, by a peculiar process known only to Squire Green, bail was allowed for Fred's appearance at Brightsburgh the next day. It was furnished by the land owner, and then Arlington, Fred, and the two constables set out to hunt up Bob Bolten and his associates.

But, it was now too late. The birds had flown. The cottage was empty, and up at the hotel it was learned that Bolten had left with his turnout three-quarters of an hour before.

Arlington took the youth over to the leading hotel, and as they sat down to a comfortable supper he listened to the boy's story, from beginning to end.

"You have had a hard time of it and no mistake," he declared. "I know just how hard-hearted that Uriah Whop is, and I don't blame you for leaving him. But, what do you intend to do now?"

"I don't know. I would like to work for you, Mr. Arlington."

"Would you? That might be rather a risky business about now."

"That's just why I ask. If you want anybody on your trips, I'll be glad to be with you."

The land speculator looked at the manly face for a moment in silence.

"He's got the mettle, that's sure," he thought. "And he might be just the right sort. I've a good mind to take him up."

"I'll work for next to nothing," urged the boy.

"I wouldn't want you to do that, my boy; I am well able to afford good wages. I was thinking of the danger you might run as my companion on the trips I intend to take around these parts. Let me tell you something. I am surrounded by enemies."

"I know that."

"But you don't know it as thoroughly as I do. I have enemies everywhere in these districts. They are trying to cheat me out of my properties here, and now it would seem they want my life."

"Can't you round 'em up, as they say out West?"

"I am trying to do that. The trouble is I cannot get at the bottom of the alliance against me. There is one man in particular who is plotting to wipe me out. He directs the work of such scoundrels as you fell in with to-day. They are his tools."

"Who is that man?"

"I cannot say. He works in the dark. But he is well-known about here; of that I feel certain."

"Then the best thing to do would be to capture one of his tools, and make the chap confess."

"Right you are, my boy, and that is what I will do, heaven helping me. But now, about working for me. I will engage you and pay you ten dollars per week and find you."

At this generous offer the boy's eyes glistened. Ten dollars was to him a very large sum.

"I hardly think I'll be worth that to you," he demurred.

"The boy who saves my life is worth a good deal more. But, another thing; do you like to ride a wheel?"

"Very much, sir."

"So do I. From this moment the wheel you found in the bushes is yours, and I will have it put in repair immediately."

"Oh, thanks! But, won't you want it?"

"I have another." Mr. Arlington

paused a moment. "Are you willing to set out with me over the mountains tomorrow? I fancy I know in what direction those rascals have gone."

"I am ready at any time, sir."

"Good! Then we start at daybreak. Now, to have the bicycle repaired."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FLYER ON THE WAY.

That Fred was delighted at the idea of possessing a first-class bicycle need not be stated.

"It's grand!" he muttered, inspecting the beautiful machine.

A dealer in bicycles soon put the wheel in proper shape.

"And now you have a wheel and are going on my trips with me," said Mr. Arlington. "You must have a proper outfit."

And in a furnishing store he fitted out the youth from head to foot with all that was necessary. This done, he took him to a hardware store and let him pick out an A No. 1 revolver.

"No telling but what you may need it," he suggested.

"And no fear but what I'll use it if necessary!" returned Fred.

At seven o'clock in the morning they were on the road, but a disagreeable surprise awaited Fred at the lower end of the main street of Briarwood.

A farm wagon was coming along, and who should be sitting on the seat but Uriah Whop!

"My guardian!" gasped Fred, and he fell in the rear.

The miser-farmer had already discovered him.

"Fred Farley!" he ejaculated. "Well, I never! Where have ye been an' where did ye git them fine duds?"

"That's my business, Mr. Whop," retorted the boy, bravely confronting his enemy.

"Du tell! Maybe it's my business, too! Jest ye stand still till I kin lay my hands on to ye!"

As he spoke, Uriah leaped from the wagon and advanced, whip in hand.

Of course the boy retreated. As the farmer approached, he back-pedaled out of reach.

"Stop! stop! ye young scamp! Stop, or I'll break every bone in yer lazy, good-fer-nuthin' body!" he shouted.

"Thanks, awfully, Mr. Whop, but I have an engagement elsewhere just now."

The smile on Fred's face made Uriah madder than ever.

"Stop, dō ye hear! I'll—I'll skin ye alive!"

The situation was so comical that even Brycomb Arlington was compelled to laugh.

"Who be you, sir?" demanded Uriah.

"I am Brycomb Arlington."

The farmer came to a dead halt, and his sallow face grew pale. For the moment he could not speak.

"Oh, yes, I've heard o' ye before," he said, at last.

"You have been abusing Fred Farley shamefully."

"Hain't so! He's an impudent an' sassy scamp, he is! He's bound out ter me, an' he run away."

"He was compelled to leave to escape your inhuman treatment."

"Tain't so!"

"It is so," put in Fred. "You treated me worse than a dog!"

"Ye lie! I'll—I'll take the skin off yer back fer thet, Farley."

"No doubt you would—if you got the chance," assumed the land speculator.

"But you shall not get the chance again. I have hired Fred to work for me."

"Work for you? Why, he can't! He's bound out ter me, I tell ye!"

"Have you the papers?"

"No, but Ezra Darston bound him ter me."

"What right had Ezra Darston over the boy?"

"He settled the Farley estate, an' he's head committeeman o' the poor-house board, an'—"

"And so he thought he could sell the boy, body and soul," finished Arlington, coldly. "He was mistaken in his authority. This lad is going with me, and if you try to molest him I'll take the case to the courts and sift it to the bottom."

At this announcement Uriah Whop grew agitated. Evidently he feared an investigation.

"Take it to the courts?" he faltered.

"That is what I said."

At this Uriah growled something under his breath, and with a savage shake of his whip he leaped into his farm wagon again and drove off.

The boy saw him go with a sigh of relief.

"I hope I'm done with him," he remarked.

"I fancy you are, my young friend, and a good riddance it is. By the way, he seemed afraid to have matters sifted in court. Do you think there is anything behind it?"

"I can't say, sir. There is one that bothers me, Mr. Arlington. When my father died it was supposed he had some property, but both Mr. Darston and Uriah Whop told me there wasn't a cent."

"Ezra Darston had your parent's estate in charge?"

"Yes, sir."

"I know him well—too well, in fact. He is both hard-hearted and unscrupulous. I am half inclined to think he is in this combine against me."

"Against you? Surely he wouldn't hire men to murder you."

"It don't seem probable, yet—men have done fearful things before now in order to get gold."

"I suppose they have."

"At present I am in a fog, but I intend to fight my way through, and when the end is reached there will be a number of great surprises, you may count on that."

"Well sir, I trust with all my heart you may come out on top!" asseverated the boy, earnestly.

On and on they went. Brycomb Arlington was a speedy rider, and the pair kept side by side on their way until almost the noon hour.

"We have covered all of fifteen miles," observed the speculator. "When we reach the valley on the other side of yonder hill, we can knock off for a rest and attack that lunch we brought along."

They were now passing through a section where many coal mines had been started and then abandoned because the work did not pay. On both sides of the road were numerous pits.

"A fellow would have a nasty tumble if he got into one of those holes," observed Fred, as they took a spurt down a little hill.

"This whole district has been honey-combed with would-be mines. People have sunk fortunes in prospecting, not only for coal, but also for oil."

"Do you think there is oil here?"

"Undoubtedly; but the thing is, to strike the right veins. I have gone over this ground a score of times, and I know it pretty thoroughly. I have several maps right here in my pocket that are

invaluable on that point. I made them after a survey lasting five months."

"I shouldn't think you would carry those maps with you."

"I want to take them over the mountains to Oil Ridge, where I shall begin operations as soon as I have brought my persecutors to justice."

They pushed on up the side of another hill. The crest reached, a long, curving, and smooth road lay before them.

"Let's coast down it!" cried the Young Flyer, enthusiastically, and off he went, with the speculator a close second.

"Look out, down by the brook," cautioned Brycomb Arlington. "The bridge may be out of repair."

"The brook is a long way off yet, sir. Now, if we can only—"

Fred broke off short. And small wonder, for ahead he suddenly saw a sight that thrilled him with horror.

Directly in front of them the bottom of the road appeared to have dropped out, and in its stead yawned a bottomless pit, ready to receive them!

CHAPTER VIII.

IN A PERILOUS STRAIT.

"Look out!"

"Take care of yourself!"

These were the warnings from each rider to the other. Both had discovered their danger at the same time, but Fred, in advance, was in the greater peril.

There was no time either to stop or to turn aside.

The yawning opening was less than twenty-five feet away, and the road ran into it on a steep decline.

It looked as if both must certainly plunge headlong into the pit.

Ned's heart seemed to stop beating; but, suddenly, he leaped straight up from the saddle of his flying steed.

The roadway was lined with overhanging trees, and into one of these he sailed.

The crashing through the branches was followed by another crashing, as Arlington followed the daring boy's example.

Fred did his best to save himself, and finally halted in his flight and clung fast.

"Are you safe?" he called out.

"Yes; but I'm pretty badly shaken up," was answered from another tree.

The boy lost no time in descending to the ground. He found his employer up a tree just ten feet further back.

"That was the narrowest escape I ever had in my life," observed Mr. Arlington, as he joined the youth. "It makes me shudder to think of the consequence had we gone over into that hole."

"Both bicycles are gone," mourned Fred. "What's to do about that?"

"Let us attend to our scratches first. We can walk around the pit and down to the brook."

This was done, and, bathing their wounds, both felt better. Then they went back and peered over the edge of the abyss.

"I can see one machine on a ledge about thirty feet down," observed the sharp-eyed boy. "The other is out of sight."

"Come with me. I fancy I can find an entrance to that hole. If I'm not mistaken, it's part of the old Firefly coal mine, abandoned six years ago."

Arlington led the way from the main road to a narrow path lined with heavy bushes. A dozen rods further on they came to the sloping entrance to a mine. The speculator was about to go on, when the boy caught his arm.

"What's the matter?"

"Look, there is a camp-fire that has just been abandoned!"

Fred was right. Close to the abandoned mine smouldered the remains of a fire, which evidently had been hastily extinguished with water and dirt.

What could it mean?

They looked around, but not a soul was in sight.

"This is queer," muttered Arlington. "If the men who built this fire were friends, why did they leave so suddenly?"

"Perhaps the fire was built by your enemies?"

"That is possible—although I imagine they have gone further than this. Let us make a detour and see if we can solve the mystery."

The speculator moved off to the left and motioned to Fred to take the opposite direction. He had drawn his pistol, and the youth thought it best to follow his example.

But the search about the entrance to the old mine produced no results.

"See anything?" questioned Arlington.

"Nothing."

"I half-fancied I saw a man back of yonder rocks, but I must have been mistaken."

They paused for several minutes longer and then entered the mine.

Fred had picked up a pine-knot from the smoldering fire, and, waving this, he soon had quite a respectable torch.

"I was right; we are coming out close to the road," observed Mr. Arlington. "We will have to be very careful. No telling how long ago this cave-in occurred. The rest of the mine may be ready to give way at any moment."

"In that case we had better skip! Now, if—hullo! there is your wheel!"

Fred ran forward, around a bend, and picked up the bicycle. Several of the spokes were bent, but otherwise the machine appeared to be all right.

"Ah, there is your wheel up on that ledge," cried Mr. Arlington, delightedly. "But, the question is, how are you going to get it?"

It was a hundred feet or more away, but there were numerous jutting rocks where a person could obtain a fair foothold.

"I'll try climbing for it!" at once decided Fred.

"Be careful."

The brave lad started to climb up the rocks. Slowly but surely he ascended, often pausing to catch his breath and survey the prospects.

At last he could just touch the bicycle. He put out his hand, and, the next instant, the machine went rattling down the rocks and landed at Arlington's very feet!

"Good! Now, come down and we'll be on our way once more!"

Fred started to descend, when—bang!

The shot came from overhead, and a bullet struck the rocks just above the boy's head.

"Look out, somebody is firing at you!" yelled Arlington. "My heavens!"

He had caught sight of a man at the top of the opening.

The man held a still smoking gun, and now was drawing a pistol.

It was Bob Bolten!

Fred could not see him, for he was in too dangerous a position on the rocks to look up; but he heard the shot and the sound of the striking bullet, and knew it was meant for him.

He crouched down under an overhanging shelf, and none too soon, for crack!

crack! crack! went the revolver, but the bullets all flew wide of their mark.

"He means to kill me, that is evident. Who can it be?"

Arlington now sprang forward. Whipping out his own weapon, he took careful aim and pulled trigger.

A report, a wild howl of pain and rage, and Bob Bolten staggered away from the top of the cave-in, out of view.

"Quick, Fred! Get to the bottom as soon as you can!" sang out the speculator. "I'll keep guard overhead."

At once the boy left his shelter and scrambled downward, landing breathless in a pile of shell rock beside his bicycle.

There was another report from overhead, and then the voice of Pete Whipple sang out:

"Reckon yer will keep out o' sight fer awhile now. We're onter ye!"

"The gang, sure enough!" exclaimed Arlington.

"And they have us in a hole in more ways than one," returned the lad, as he caught up his bicycle and followed his employer deeper into the old mine.

"I cannot see why they should seek your life, Fred!"

"I can. They are enraged at me because I got you out of their clutches."

"That must be so."

"The question is, what shall we do next? Go back to the entrance and reconnoitre?"

"That will probably be best. And we must be very careful, for those fellows will not hesitate to kill us both if they get half a chance."

Wheeling their machines beside them, they hurried up to the slope which led out into the open air.

They scarcely had reached the slanting sunlight when a voice stopped them.

"Halt! Advance at your peril!"

"Who speaks?" demanded Arlington.

"Pete Whipple."

"Well, rascal, what do you want?"

"We want you to come to terms, Brycomb Arlington."

"Terms about what?"

"You know well enough. In the fust place, we want them maps yer have with yer."

The speculator was dumfounded. What did they know of the papers so securely hidden in the inner pocket of his vest?

"Who says I have maps with me?" he demanded.

"We know yer have, fer one o' the gang saw 'em at the Briarwood Hotel."

"You'll get no maps from me," and as he spoke he caught sight of Pete Whipple on the rocks beyond.

Quick as a flash he drew his pistol, and Fred duplicated the action.

Crack!

Bang!

Both pistols were discharged almost simultaneously, and Pete Whipple was seen to throw up his hands and fall flat on his face.

"He's done for!" exclaimed Arlington.

"The wretch deserved his fate. Now, if we can corner Bob Bolten—"

He got no further. Some loose rocks fell in a shower around them. He looked up. The entire roof of the cavern seemed to be on the point of falling upon their very heads!

CHAPTER IX.

UNDERGROUND.

Firing off the pistols had done the mischief. The rocks had been loose before, and the agitation of the shots had caused them to break away at last.

Tons and tons of dirt and rocks were about to descend, and this would bury them alive!

"Back! back!" yelled Fred. "Don't go ahead!"

He caught his employer by the arm and dragged him back a distance of fifty feet.

B-o-o-m!

Down came the dirt and rocks with a roar that seemed to shake the very earth.

They were completely covered with debris, and for the moment were too startled to either move or speak.

The falling of the mass was followed by a dull rumble from the opposite end of the old mine, and, of a sudden, both found themselves in total darkness.

"Well, we're right in it, and no mistake," said Fred at length. "It's as dark as Egypt."

"I'm afraid we are entombed alive!"

"Entombed alive?"

"Yes. Did you not hear that other fall of earth and stone? I much fear the other opening, near the big hole, is also closed up. Let us strike a light and make an examination."

A match was lit and another torch was extemporized; then, as rapidly as they could move, they made their way toward the spot where the bicycles had been recovered.

A solid wall of dirt confronted them.

No opening of any sort could be found!

"I thought so," muttered the speculator. "This is awful!"

"What can we do?"

"We must find some way out, and must act promptly. First we must make a systematic search," said Arlington. "We must cover every foot of the ground."

They went to work, and the anxious search lasted fully three hours. By that time both were exhausted, and threw themselves down to rest, panting for breath.

"It's no use!" groaned the speculator. "My enemies have triumphed, and through no action of their own."

"Never say die!" cried the brave lad. "I'm going at it again, after a good drink for luck!"

He walked off to where a tail of the brook flowed through the mine.

As he bent down to drink, the glint of the sun caught his eye deep down in the pool.

From whence did the sunshine come?

From nowhere but from outside, that was certain.

He leaped into the water, took a deep breath, and dove under the surface.

Arlington saw all this and rushed forward.

"Fred! Fred!" he called.

There were was no answer.

Five minutes passed.

"The foolish boy; what can he be up to?" he wondered.

Suddenly a head shot up in the pool.

"Eureka!" was shouted.

"What have you discovered?"

"An opening big enough for a horse and wagon to pass through."

"In the water-course?"

"Yes, a tunnel. We can go through with ease and take our machines with us. Let us go through at once."

Arlington thought for a moment.

"No; our enemies may be on the watch. Let us wait until it is darker—that is, if the passageway is safe at night."

"Oh, it's dead easy, sir."

"Then we will wait. Thank heaven, Fred, you found the opening."

For two hours they sat in the old mine waiting for the day to depart.

Satisfied that it was now dark enough, they procured their machines, threw them into the pool, and boldly followed.

The boy led the way, and in a very few moments they were free once more—out of the mine.

"I would give a good deal to know if those rascals are still in the vicinity," observed Arlington, as he walked to the top of a slight hill and gazed earnestly into the darkness on all sides.

"My advice is to keep quiet and dark. If they are around and think we are still buried alive, we have the advantage of them," observed the wary youth.

"Right there, my boy. Let us leave our machines in yonder hollow and go on a silent tour of inspection."

As silently as two Indians on a war trail they moved over the ground, up one hill and down another, until they had made a complete circuit of the abandoned mine.

Not a trace of the scoundrels who had fired upon them could be found.

Utterly exhausted, they came back to where the bicycles had been left. They threw themselves under a mass of brush, and there rested for the remainder of the night. Both were so tired that neither awoke until the sun was high in the heavens.

The journey across the mountains was renewed shortly after their scant breakfast. They pursued a different road, and nothing occurred until about three o'clock in the afternoon.

They were riding at full speed down into a deep valley—coasting, in fact, with both feet up under the handle bars—when, without warning, a pistol shot rang out.

Crack!

"Look out!" yelled Arlington. "We are running into an ambush!"

He was right, for over the tops of a number of bushes fifty feet ahead could be seen the moving heads of two men.

Fred applied the brake. At the same time he drew his now ready pistol and fired at the nearest of the men. There was a curse and a return shot that hit one of the spokes of the forward wheel and cut it as with a saw.

Luckily, the road was wide at that point, so both riders had small difficulty in turning about and pedaling out of danger.

"The gang again! They have discovered our escape!" cried Fred.

"To cover! To cover! Follow me!" commanded the other.

He dashed down a side road, and Ned came after. A turn or two, and both found themselves between overhanging rocks, thickly fringed on both sides by heavy bushes.

"Run your bicycle in there!" whispered Arlington. "This will afford us a good hiding-place."

He leaped to the ground and scurried ahead. The machines were put out of sight, and man and boy stood with pistols in hand on the defensive.

For a while utter silence reigned. Then they heard the bushes overhead crack softly.

Arlington pointed upward, and Fred nodded. Their enemies were directly above them.

"They're around here somewhar!" they heard Pete Whipple growl. "I wish I could jess git a bead on one or tudder of 'em fer thet shot in the arm they give me!"

"Don't talk, or they'll hear ye!" put in Bob Bolten. "Where's Hominy Ike?"

"The nigger is comin'," returned Pete

Whipple. "Blast the measly luck! This is the wust trail I ever yet got on to!"

"Never mind; the boss will pay us well ef we do our work O. K."

The pursuers now passed out of hearing, and for a moment our two friends breathed easier.

At last the crackling of the bushes ceased altogether, showing that the ruffians had left the vicinity.

"There must be three of them—the new addition a negro," remarked Arlington. "I saw Pete Whipple, and was strongly tempted to shoot at him, but it would have been risky. They would have us at their mercy here."

"You are right," rejoined Fred, as he started to inspect the place in which they had sought shelter.

CHAPTER X.

FIRE!

After a short tarry they decided to remain no longer; so, raising their wheels, once more the two quitted the hiding-place.

"Supposing I mount to the top of yonder ledge and reconnoitre?" suggested Fred.

"Go ahead; but do it as softly as you can."

The lad climbed the bushes readily, and, once on the spot which the rascals had visited, he made a careful inspection.

Their trail led over to the main road, but the gang were nowhere in sight.

He was about to descend to where he had left Arlington, when something in the air caused him to pause.

He gave a long sniff.

"Fire!" he murmured. "I wonder if they are camping in the vicinity?"

The smoke commenced to come thicker, and he walked a short distance toward it.

Then came a sudden puff of wind, and a number of sparks fell around him.

The woods were on fire!

"Fire!" he cried, and, running to the ledge again, dropped below hurriedly.

"The woods are afire and the flames are sweeping in this direction!" he announced to Arlington.

"The gang must mean to burn us out," he went on. "They have got us like rats in a trap. No wonder they quitted the search so readily!"

"We must ride for it, my boy!"

"That's gospel truth, sir!"

Side by side they ran from the shelter, dragging their bicycles beside them.

The air was growing hotter. Fanned by a lively breeze, the fire was leaping from one spot to another with fearful rapidity.

"It will be a race for life!" averred Fred, as he sprang out on the road.

He was right. Escape seemed almost cut off in every direction.

"We'll have to ride right through some of that fire!" firmly announced Arlington. "There is not a second to lose!"

"Hold on! The heat will be sure to burst the tires unless we let some of the air out!"

The speculator saw the wisdom of the boy rider's remark, and with all haste they reduced the pressure in the tires.

Then they started side by side on their most perilous ride.

The smoke was so thick it almost blinded them.

The burning brush was swept by the wind, and sparks fell on their necks and hands; but on they sped.

Now they reached a rather steep hill, and progress became more difficult.

"Keep at it, Mr. Arlington!" cried the young athlete, as he saw the land speculator on the point of giving out.

"You—you are a born wheelman, and I am not!" gasped the man. "Go on and save yourself!"

"And leave you behind? Never!"

"But—but I am out of wind!"

"The top of the hill is not far off. Come, do your best, sir!"

Thus urged, the speculator kept at his work, and they kept on through a perfect fire avenue, as it seemed.

The two reached the brow of the hill almost strangled and exhausted; but they dared not pause, and started on the down grade.

Faster and faster they flew, until their speed rivaled that of an express train!

At last this down grade came to an end. The road made a long curve, crossed a bridge, and ascended another hill.

The fire was left far behind and the danger was passed.

Utterly exhausted, man and boy wheeled from the road to a grassy spot and dropped to the ground almost insensible and panting for breath.

The ride for life was won! The race with death was over, and they were saved!

How thankful they were!

For two hours they felt too exhausted to leave the vicinity, and lay there to rest and recruit.

"Once more my enemies are defeated," observed the speculator. "But you, I fancy, are heartily sick of having thrown in your fortunes with me, my brave boy!"

"Not a bit of it, Mr. Arlington. 'I said I would stay by you—'"

"But your life has been in peril—"

"I know that, but I am not complaining. I think you'll get the best of that gang yet, and I'm going to do what I can to help you."

"You are clear grit, my boy—one in a thousand. Well, if I do come out on top, I'll promise that you shall lose nothing by sticking by me. But now we must be on our way. We will have to go around by Hickory Falls to reach Oil Ridge," said Mr. Arlington.

"They'll take us for a couple of tramps when we get into town," laughed Fred; and then, suddenly, "but how about your money and those maps—are they safe?"

"They should be—tucked safely away in my vest."

Mr. Arlington began a hasty examination. "My heavens!" he gasped; "my pocketbook is gone, and so are those maps!"

CHAPTER XI.

A SEARCH IN THE DARK.

"Gone!" and Fred showed his dismay. "Where could you have dropped them?"

"I don't know."

"How much money did you have with you?"

"Seven thousand dollars."

"Phew! That's a big sum to carry around in your pocket."

"I know it; but the fact is, I was on the way to Oil Ridge to buy a certain claim for sale there. The old man who owns the claim is very peculiar and won't take anything for his land but ready money."

"It's too bad, Mr. Arlington."

"Yes; but, bad as is the loss of the money, the loss of the maps is worse. I wouldn't take ten thousand dollars for those papers."

"Cannot you duplicate them?"

"No; if they are gone forever I lose

the location of one of the most valuable coal mines in this whole district."

"Then the best thing we can do is to hunt for both papers and money."

"We cannot go back to those flames."

"No; the only thing to do is to wait until the fire burns out and then go over every inch of the ground thoroughly."

At this Arlington shook his head.

"It is absolutely necessary I get to Oil Ridge by to-morrow night."

"Then why not leave me behind to do the searching?"

"You? Alone? Are you not afraid, my boy?"

"No. I'll keep as shady as possible."

"It's a great temptation, but I hate to let you run into such grave peril on my account."

"Don't you worry! I'll have my wheel to run away on, and if it comes to a stand I'll use this," and the brave lad tapped his pistol.

The speculator looked at him admiringly.

"The kind of a boy I like," he thought. "One of these days I may take it into my head to adopt him."

"I've half a mind to take you up," he said.

"Done!"

"And how long will you remain in the district?"

"Until I find the missing things or make sure they were burnt."

The matter was talked over until it was thoroughly settled; then, with some parting advice, Arlington mounted his wheel and rode off.

Over in the west it began to grow dark; clouds were rolling up, portending a storm, and a storm would most likely put out the forest fire and enable him to begin his hunt for the missing money and the maps!

Seeing this, the flyer sought shelter where several giant trees grew in a clump, one across the other.

Soon the soft patter of rain commenced, and then a downpour, accompanied by a low rumble of distant thunder. Then the storm center came closer and vivid flashes of lightning swept athwart the sky.

"This storm is going to be a corker, and no mistake," decided Fred.

Scarcely had the thought been formed than a blinding flash threw him flat on his back.

One of the trees had been struck!

The electric fluid ran down the trunk, splitting it in half.

Away flew the bark and branches, and the great mass of wood settled slowly to the ground, pinning the boy directly across the chest—fast as if in a vise.

But he made no outcry. What was the use? No one was at hand to help him, that was certain. He must await events.

Ten minutes went by, and the terrific storm kept growing worse.

All about the lad the ground was a mass of mud, and into this the tree kept sinking, sinking, until it was with the utmost difficulty that Fred could get his breath.

His ribs seemed to be cracking within him, and he gave himself up for lost.

Bang!

The report was like that of a cannon exploding.

The whole heavens were lit up with electricity, and the boy felt a shock that fairly paralyzed him.

One of the remaining trees had been struck!

Crack! crash! thum!

Down came the tree close beside its fellow, and as it turned over it caught

the fallen tree and twisted it partly around.

When the shock was over, Fred found himself free! The lightning that had made him a prisoner had given him his liberty again!

Grabbing his bicycle, he wheeled the machine out into the open air.

The storm now began to abate as rapidly as it had come, and, climbing a tall tree, Fred gazed earnestly in the direction in which the forest fire had been located; only a faint smoke was seen.

"That won't start up again in a hurry," he said to himself. "I am perfectly safe in going back. But I must keep watch for Pete Whipple and his gang."

Jumping on his bicycle once more, Flyer Fred rode on the back track, examining every foot of the way as he rode.

A mile was passed and he found himself amid the burnt woods; then he came to a halt at the base of a ledge.

A bit of leather, half-buried in the sand, struck his eye; he ran forward and dug away at the object.

"Eureka!" The lost pocketbook was found!

Hastily he opened it. Inside was a heavy block of bank-bills, all of large denomination.

"I've got the money, anyway!" he asserted, triumphantly.

"Have ye? Well, I reckon we'll take that, youngster!"

He turned, to find himself confronted by Pete Whipple!

CHAPTER XII.

A PRISONER OF THE ENEMY.

The flyer was both astonished and alarmed by this turn of affairs, never dreaming that his enemy was so close at hand.

Pete carried a long horse-pistol in his hand, and this he now raised and pointed at the head of the lad.

"Do ye surrender, youngster?"

"Would you shoot me?"

"You bet, sonny! Up with yer hands an' throw that pocketbook over here."

No use to attempt resistance, so Fred did as commanded; but he was on the watch, and as Whipple stooped to pick up the wallet he leaped forward and bore the man to the ground.

A dexterous twist, and the plucky lad had possession of the horse-pistol.

"Cuss ye! Help! help!" yelled the ruffian, struggling in vain to shake the boy off.

"Stop, or I'll do some shooting," commanded Fred. "I'll have you to know—"

He got no further, for from out of the brush behind him crept the negro, Hominy Ike!

In his hand Ike whirled a heavy billet of wood, and at once down it came.

The poor boy saw stars; then he knew no more.

When he came to his senses all was pitch dark around him.

He tried to move, to learn that he was bound hands and feet to a ring in a stone wall!

He felt about him and discovered that he was in a small cavern.

Presently he heard voices from outside and smelt the odor of frying fish.

His enemies were encamped outside of the little cave.

As they ate they talked, and Fred heard the voices of Pete Whipple, Hank Brown, the man he had seen at the cottage near the milk-house; Bob Bolten and Ike, the negro.

"How much was there in the wad?" Bolten was asking.

"Five thousand dollars," replied Pete. "Yer lie! There was more!" cried Brown.

A wordy war followed. Hominy Ike was appealed to, and he declared that Whipple told the truth.

"W'ot yer goin' ter do with the boy?" now questioned Bolten.

"Don't know as we'll have to do much if he don't come around putty soon," growled Pete. "Ike about settled him."

"I'll take a look at him," and Hank Brown, lighting a torch, came into the cavern.

Anxious to hear what more the gang might have to say, Fred dropped to the ground again.

The ruffian kicked him and held the torch close to his eyelids.

Then he walked outside.

"He's still at it."

"No coming around?" asked Whipple.

"Nixey."

"Too bad! I wanted to question him about Brycomb Arlington."

"You wouldn't get much out of a lad like him," laughed Bolten. "That boy's a gritty one."

"Do you know his name?"

"Fred Farley."

"The deuce you say!" ejaculated Whipple. "I thought he was Arlington's kid."

"They are no relation to each other."

"Is he Richard Farley's son?"

"I reckon he is."

The leader of the gang gave a low whistle.

"If he is, maybe we're in luck!" he asserted. "That is, if he gets so he can talk again. Do you remember old Mammy Quay, of Brightsburgh?"

The others nodded.

"Well, she told me something about this boy's father and the boss."

All of the others were astonished at this declaration.

Fred was likewise amazed.

What could it mean? He remembered what Mammy Quay had told him—to beware of Ezra Darston. Was it possible that the lawyer was mixed up in this plot against Brycomb Arlington?

"Does she know anything about the boss' doings?" asked Bob.

"You bet!—too much. She ought to be choked off."

"Well, what are you going to get out of the youngster?"

"Never mind—you'll see. I'm going to turn in now."

There was a general grunt of satisfaction at this.

The gang were a lazy set, and the day's work had tired them.

Lots were cast as to which should remain on guard, and the duty fell to Hominy Ike.

The negro grumbled a good deal at this, and to console himself took a long drink out of a large black bottle.

One after another of the gang turned in to sleep; and sleep they did, while Ike stirred up the fire and took a walk around the camp.

Then he brought forth a briar-root pipe, filled it with cut plug tobacco, and lit it.

Taking a last look at the fire, he entered the cavern and held a torch to Flyer Fred's face.

"Ain't cum to yit. It dun look like I had dun him fer keeps."

He kicked the boy's foot, but the brave flyer never stirred.

Apparently satisfied that the prisoner was yet senseless, Ike walked outside and sat down by the entrance.

Quarter of an hour passed, and Hom-

iny Ike's head commenced to bob forward upon his breast; ten minutes more, and the head sank lower and the briar-root pipe fell upon the grass.

The guard was asleep!

"Now or never!" thought the prisoner.

For minutes he had been working at his bonds, and now, by a dexterous twist, he managed to free one hand.

The other, however, could not be slipped from the ring that held it; yet, working with patience, in a little while the flyer found himself free.

As silently as a cat he approached the sleeping guard.

Hominy Ike had the lad's pistol sticking in his belt.

It was delicate work to extract the weapon without arousing the sleeper, but it was accomplished, and Fred breathed a long sigh of relief.

Looking around, he discovered his bicycle standing against a tree, so he knew how to act.

He wheeled the cycle away for several yards, but suddenly halted as he thought of Arlington's money.

He skulked back to Pete Whipple's side.

Whipple's shirt was partly open, as he lay there, face up, and in the dim light Flyer Fred saw a bulky package sticking up.

He thrust his hand in and drew the package forth.

It contained the pocketbook and some papers.

As he straightened up, Whipple opened his eyes, and by the dim light saw Fred's form.

"Hullo, there?" he called out. "Who is that?"

"Fred Farley! He has escaped! Boys! Up an' after the little rat!"

A second later he took aim at Fred with his horse-pistol and pulled the trigger on the now fleeing lad.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

The aim of the ruffian was good, and had the pistol gone off it is more than likely that Flyer Fred would have been seriously if not fatally injured.

The trigger snapped, but no report followed.

The cry had aroused the others, and all leaped up.

"What's the row?"

"Has the boy got away?"

"Yes! There he goes! After him, boys! Shoot him down!"

Crack!

Bang!

The report of two pistols answered the command, and the bullets sang close to Fred's ears, causing him to duck in a hurry.

He had reached his wheel. In a trice he was in the saddle and flying down the road at all the speed he could muster.

The gang came after him. Thinking to run him down on foot, they did not bother to get their horses.

On and on, over the rough road, went the young wheelman. His pursuers continued to fire their pistols, but not a shot came near him. Soon the camp was left several hundred yards behind.

"We can't catch him this way!" shouted Hank Brown. "Let's go back for the hosses!"

He started on the return, followed by Bob Bolten and Hominy Ike.

"Bring my hoss with you!" yelled Pete Whipple. "I'll keep runnin', so as not ter lose the trail. Jingo ef he ain't a reg'lar scorcher on thet machine!"

He went on, and the others disappeared. Suddenly Whipple realized his loss.

"Gone—money an' papers, an' all!" he hissed. "We must stop him, dead or alive!"

From time to time Fred snatched a look backward. He could see Pete Whipple in the dim distance.

"Stop, or I'll fire at you!" yelled the lad.

"Yer can't scare me; yer ain't got no shooter!" howled Whipple.

"Haven't I? How do you like that?" Bang!

The pistol shot, sent close to the ground, filled the leader of the gang with terror. He dodged back, and from that moment kept in the shadow of the bushes that lined the roadway.

It was not long after this that Fred heard the tramp of horses behind him. The rest of the gang had come up once more, bringing Whipple's animal with them. A hasty consultation was held, and on they came, harder than ever.

Silently the flying lad prayed that he might strike a bit of smooth road. On such a stretch he could easily out-distance any horse, he felt sure, but the way was getting more mountainous.

He had come to a rustic bridge. Below was a mountain torrent, lined on either side with huge rocks.

As quick as a flash he dismounted, and, leaving the bridge, climbed down to the stream, taking his bicycle with him. He ran along the water's edge a hundred feet or more, and then plunged into the bushes close to where a series of waterfalls were.

He was not a moment too soon. Up to the bridge swept his pursuers.

"Hold on!" he heard Hank Brown shout.

"What's up?" questioned Bolten, as he drew rein, followed by the others.

"I didn't see him cross this bridge."

"No more did I!"

"Bet he's in hiding about here."

"You go on, Hominy, and we'll make a search," commanded Whipple.

"All right, boss," replied the negro.

Pete Whipple and Bolten sprang down on the same side used by Flyer Fred. Hank Brown went down on the other, and a minute search for the youth in hiding began.

Of course, Fred was much disturbed. He felt that the men would ere long reach the vicinity of his hiding-place, and then to avoid exposure would be next to impossible.

He was close to the falls. By putting out his hand he could touch the water.

He crept back a few paces.

Yes, here was an opening right under the falls!

Silently but quickly he caught up his bicycle and stepped toward the unique shelter.

Once within the shelter, he drew back as far as possible.

Ten minutes passed. If his pursuers were coming in that direction they must now be close at hand, but they did not appear.

He sat down on a rock and clung to his machine. Thus for a full hour; then he cautiously ventured outside.

His pursuers were gone. Nothing could be seen or heard of them on any hand; so it behooved him to be on his way again.

He started down the stream looking for another bridge, and just as the gray streaks of dawn appeared in the eastern sky he struck another highway and drew his wheel up to it.

"Danville—6 miles."

That was the sign stuck up close to the bridge, and much to Fred's satisfaction, for he knew Danville was almost on the direct route to Oil Ridge.

The road was smooth and level, and once on his bicycle the flyer made rapid time, reaching the outskirts of Danville before seven o'clock.

He was thoroughly tired, as well as hungry. Pausing at the principal hotel, he entered and asked the clerk for breakfast.

"Ready now, sir," was the reply.

"Is there a stage from here to Oil Ridge?" he asked.

"Stage left half an hour ago."

"And when does the next one leave?"

"Not until four o'clock this afternoon."

"And when does that reach Oil Ridge?"

"At eleven o'clock."

"Is the road a hilly one?"

"Too hilly for bike riding, I can assure you of that."

"Thanks; then I'll wait for the afternoon stage. In the meantime I would like to have a room where I can steal a little sleep."

"All right, sir; I'll fix you up after breakfast."

A little later Flyer Fred was stowing away food as only a thoroughly hungry youth can.

Having satisfied his craving, he was shown to a room on the second floor.

"Call me half an hour before the stage goes," he ordered.

Fred was ready enough for sleep, but he must first inspect the package he had taken from Pete Whipple.

As he had surmised, the pocketbook contained all of the money Brycomb Arlington had had in it.

Fred stowed the bills in a safe place and then commenced to inspect the remainder of the package.

There was a bulky envelope filled with various papers and the missing maps!

Suddenly he started back in amazement.

Upon the back of one of the documents he read these words:

Last Will and Testament

of

RICHARD FARLEY.

"Father's will!" he ejaculated. "Can it be possible!"

With trembling hands he began to unfold the paper, which was much worn at the creases and in danger of falling apart.

There was a long preamble to the will, which Fred scanned but hastily. Then the following words struck him:

"To my only son, Frederick Farley, I bequeath my entire right, title, and interest to the Little Diamond coal mine, for him and his heirs to hold forever. Of this portion of my estate Ezra Darston, of Grainville, is appointed sole guardian, he knowing fully my wishes concerning operations at the mine until my son shall become of age."

"The Little Diamond mine," thought the boy. "I never heard of it before. If father left it to me, why hasn't Ezra Darston mentioned that fact to me, and if the mine is valuable why did he send me to the poorhouse and afterward bind me out to Uriah Whop?"

For several minutes Fred sat in silence speculating upon his discovery; then a discussion between two men in the next room arrested his attention.

"Your time is up, Brycomb Arlington. Your option on that claim is ended!"

"Wait just a day longer," pleaded the other. "Just twenty-four hours."

"Not a day—not an hour, Arlington!"

"You want that land for yourself, Malcom Diez."

"What if I do? Isn't it fair? You should have been on hand with your cash, as promised."

"I tell you I was robbed."

"It's a likely story, but still it don't concern me. If you are not at Oil Ridge by noon with the cash, your deal falls through. That is settled."

Then followed the slamming of a door, and some one hurried down the hotel stairs to the bar-room.

"The deal is lost!" Fred heard the other murmur sadly.

"Not yet, Mr. Arlington. Here is your money!"

Had a ghost stepped into the room, Brycomb Arlington would not have been more astonished.

"Fred!"

"Here is your money, I say, and also your maps. It still lacks three hours and thirty-five minutes of noon. Can't you get a horse to take you to Oil Ridge and thus save that deal I heard you mention?"

"I will! I will! But where did you come from? How did you get the money? Where is that gang of villains?"

"I'll tell you my story later, when I reach Oil Ridge by the evening stage. Now, you had better hurry."

A few words more followed, and, with the money safe in his pocket, Arlington hastened for the stables, and a few minutes later Fred saw him go galloping down the road as though for very life.

The speculator was racing against time for a purse worth twenty thousand dollars!

CHAPTER XIV.

A QUARREL OF WORDS.

Flyer Fred watched his employer out of sight, standing in the hallway by a long window while so doing.

As Arlington disappeared, the boy felt a hand on his shoulder and found himself face to face with Ezra Darston!

For the moment the youth was taken aback, not having dreamed that the lawyer from Grainville was in the vicinity.

The lawyer was a tall, thin-faced man, with a pointed nose and small, ferret-like eyes.

He was noted for his general closeness and his disagreeable way of addressing persons he deemed his inferiors.

"Well, young man, what are you doing out here?" was demanded, as Ezra gazed searchingly into the boy's face.

"I might ask the same question of you, Mr. Darston."

"Chut! chut! Don't talk so to me, boy! Why are you not at Uriah Whop's farm?"

"Because we couldn't agree, that's why."

"Couldn't agree? Do you mean to say you disobeyed him?"

"He wanted to whip me for nothing, and I ran away."

Darston's face grew ugly.

"You ran away!" he squeaked.

"Yes, I did run away!"

"You—you—scamp. You'll get back without delay!"

"No, sir! We have parted company for good. I am going to look out for myself hereafter."

"I'll not listen to such talk; I'll hand you over to the constable; I'll—I'll—"

Ezra stopped short, and a changed look came into his thin face.

"So you want to shift for yourself, and after all Whop and I have done for you?"

"You haven't done much, Mr. Darston."

"Base ingratitude makes you say that. When your father was killed on the railroad I did all I could for you. However, if you are so headstrong as to go off on your own hook—why, do so, and welcome. I suppose I'll have to fix matters up with Uriah Whop for it."

"Then you'll let me go?" questioned Fred, suspiciously.

"Yes, go; and I trust you'll not regret your heedless course."

Darston was about to pass on, when Fred caught him by the arm.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Darston; I want to ask you about something."

"What? Perhaps about my son's bicycle. He got it back, but it was sadly abused, and you should have been trounced for stealing it."

"I wasn't going to speak about his bike. That was a little difficulty we settled between us. I want to speak to you about my father's estate."

Ezra's look showed his uneasiness.

"What of it?" he snapped. "There is no money coming to you, I can tell you that."

"You were one of my father's executors."

"I was."

"Who was the other?"

"Paul Vermuth, who died last year."

"And you say my father left nothing?"

"Not more than was needed to pay funeral expenses and the like. I have the account at my office if you want to look it over."

"What about his right, title, and interest in the Little Diamond coal mine?"

Had a bomb exploded at the lawyer's feet he would not have been more non-plussed. His lean face grew ashen and he trembled from head to foot.

"Who—who told you about that mine?" he demanded.

"Never mind who told me. Please answer my question," replied Fred, sharply.

"I—I know nothing about it."

"You tell a falsehood, Ezra Darston. You know all about it!"

"Ha! boy, do you threaten me?" hissed the lawyer, and springing forward he caught Fred by the throat, but the agile boy easily slipped from his grasp.

"None of that, sir, or I shall defend myself in a way you do not dream of."

"Do you threaten me?"

"As much as you threaten me—yes. It's a game two can play at."

"You whipper-snapper!"

"Supposing you let compliments drop and talk common-sense. I want to get at the bottom of my father's affairs, and now is just as good a time as any to investigate."

"You can come to my office in Grainville and do your investigating."

"Thanks; I will—later on. But it may be to your interest to answer a few questions now. What of the Little Diamond coal mine?"

"I know nothing of your father's interest—if he had one—in such a mine."

"Where is the Little Diamond located?"

"That I don't know, either."

"Perhaps you don't even know anything about Pete Whipple, Hank Brown, Bob Bolton, and Hominy Ike?"

Scarcely had he mentioned the names than he felt he had made a great mistake, for at once Darston was on his guard.

"Who—who are you talking about?" he asked.

"A gang of lawless men—ruffians, all of them—I met but yesterday."

"And how should I know them? Boy,

do you take me for a rascal, too? I am one of Grainville's most honored citizens."

"You know those men—and you know about the Little Diamond mine, and some day I mean to get at the bottom of this affair," said the boy, and turning he started for his room.

But Darston would not allow him to depart. He stopped the youth at the doorway.

"See here, Fred Farley, we must come to an understanding," threateningly. "Come to my room immediately."

"I will—in a few minutes."

Fred slipped into his own apartment and closed the door. The precious papers were still where he had put them, and he thrust the mass into the inner pocket of his vest.

When he rejoined Ezra, the lawyer showed plainly that he was greatly agitated.

They soon reached the entrance to a room in the front of the second story. Darston opened the door for the other to enter.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Darston, before we go in. I want it understood from the start that no underhanded work is to take place in there."

"Boy, what do you mean? You speak as if I were a—a bunko steerer or pick-pocket."

"Never mind; you understand me, Ezra Darston," and Fred entered the room.

The lawyer was not slow to follow. He was about to lock the door, when Fred snatched the key away and threw it out of the window.

"We will have this interview behind an unlocked door, if you please."

"You are a strange boy, and I presume I will have to humor you," the disconcerted guardian snapped.

"Yes, you will have to humor me—just now."

"Well, come to the point, Farley; my time in Danville is limited."

"You just intimated that we must come to an understanding."

"Exactly! Now, what I want to know is—er—what do you know of—er—a Little Diamond coal mine?" and Darston's face was a study.

"I know it belonged to my father and that he left it to me. And, what is more, you were made sole executor so far as that piece of property was concerned. Paul Vermuth had nothing to do with it."

"Who told you this?"

"I have seen my father's will."

Darston leaped from the chair into which he had fallen.

"Your father's will? You must be crazy. He left no will."

"If that is so, how is it you were appointed my guardian?"

"Why—er—I mean he left no such will as you mention—that is, I never heard of or saw it."

"Mr. Darston, I do not believe you. I now well enough know that you are cheating me out of my rights. You tried to get me out of the way by packing me out to Uriah Whop's farm, and now you are perfectly willing I should shift for myself. But that won't satisfy me. I have a friend who is rich, and I shall ask him to aid me in bringing this matter to a settlement through the courts."

"You villain! You little spy! I've a good mind to choke those words down your throat! What have you learned? You mentioned some men you had met. What have they told you about me? Answer me!" And so enraged was he that he hurled the youth flat upon his back in his outburst of fear and wrath.

"Let up!" cried the astonished boy.

"I won't, you whelp! Do you think I have played my game for years for nothing? Not much! I'll have the truth out of you and your promise to keep silent, or, mark my word, you shall not leave this hotel alive!"

And Ezra Darston, whipping a dagger from his bosom, turned the point directly toward Fred's throat!

CHAPTER XV.

MORE PERILS.

For the instant it looked as if the infuriated lawyer would murder the lad then and there, for the sharp point pricked the skin.

"Will you confess? That, or you die!"

"No, I will not confess!" and as he made the retort he lifted one leg and gave his opponent a sharp kick in the chin.

This attack was so unexpected and painful that Ezra Darston, uttering a yell of pain, fell back on the carpet, Fred springing to his feet. Then he placed the center-table between them and drew his revolver.

"I've a good mind to shoot you right now!" he cried, hotly.

"No! no! no!" shrieked the lawyer, white with fear. "I—I was only trying to scare you."

"Drop that dagger."

"Let us argue the point. I—"

"Drop that dagger, I say!"

Down upon the floor fell the shining steel.

"Now, Ezra Darston, up with your hands!"

"Wha—what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to have you locked up."

"Me?"

"Yes, you! I've seen enough to convince me that you are a perjurer and a swindler, and I'm going to air this case in court if I have to borrow money to do it on."

Fred started for the speaking-tube that connected with the office.

"Don't!"

"Stand where you are. I will show you—"

Crash!

In his rage, Darston had picked up a heavy footstool and flung it at the boy's head.

The footstool missed its mark and went crashing through the window to the street below.

Ere the excitement had subsided Ezra Darston had sneaked from the room and gone below by a back way.

Flyer Fred went after him, but the lawyer eluded the boy, and, leaping on his horse, which was tied to a near-by post, he left the village on a gallop.

"What's the row, young man?" demanded the proprietor of the hotel, as he rushed up.

"I wanted that man held, that's all," was answered.

"Who? Lawyer Darston?"

"Yes."

"What's the trouble?"

"It's a private matter."

"Oh, well, have your own way about it. But who pays for the window?"

"He broke it; charge it to his account," and Fred at once sought his own room.

There Fred looked over the balance of the papers, but could make nothing out of them.

"I'll have to get Mr. Arlington to help me," he decided.

He dropped into a troubled slumber, from which he was awakened by the announcement that the stage was about to start.

He was soon on board, and his bicycle was tied on top. Then the turn-out started for Oil Ridge.

There were but few passengers, and they included several commercial travelers and an old woman in black.

The outside seat of the stage was filled, so Fred was compelled to sit inside beside this old woman, all the others being outside.

She was an ancient-looking dame, and wore a big shawl and also a thick veil, as though in mourning for some one.

On and on rattled the coach along the rough road, and as it sped along Fred began to grow sleepy.

"Might as well take a nap on the other seat, young man," suggested the veiled lady. "I shan't object a bit, for I can see you are all tired out."

"Thank you; I don't know but what I will," replied the boy, and he stretched himself out on the other seat.

The voice of the old lady sounded strangely familiar, and the flyer could but wonder where he had heard it before.

Half an hour more passed, and it looked as if the youth was sound asleep.

"Now is my chance," muttered the old woman, as she bent over his face and listened to his breathing.

"Asleep, true enough. Now, I'll search him and find out if he has any of those documents intrusted to Pete Whipple."

With great dexterity she commenced to feel first in one pocket and then another. Not a find rewarded her search; but, undismayed, the searcher attacked the inner pockets.

"Ah!"

The packet was pulled forth!

"The papers, as sure as fate! And what is—oh!"

The coach, giving a tremendous lurch, threw the veiled woman down, with Fred partly on top of her.

"Hullo!" cried the youth. "My gracious! Let me help you up, madam!"

He struggled to rise and to assist the veiled form. Another lurch, and the veil coming off revealed the face of—Ezra Darston!

For the moment the astonished boy stared at the rascally lawyer; then, realizing his peril and the fact that he had been asleep, he felt for the package and his pistol at the same time.

"Up with your hands, you old thief!" he called. "Up, I say, or I'll fire as sure as my name is Fred Farley!"

"Don't shoot!" howled Ezra. "Don't—it's—it's all a mistake."

"Give me my packet!"

"I will, Fred; there!"

Slap! whack!

Two blows were delivered full in the lad's face. The next moment Darston had bounded from the coach and was speeding down the rough road as fast as his long legs would carry him.

"Stop the coach! Ho! driver!"

"What's the trouble in there?" roared the driver, coming to a halt.

"That man has robbed me!"

"What man?"

"The man dressed as an old woman!"

"The deuce you say! Where is he now?"

"There he goes down the road."

As Fred spoke he sprang out.

"Take my wheel to Oil Ridge!" he shouted. "I am going to get my stuff back or know the reason why!"

And off he sped, leaving the driver of the coach and the other passengers bewildered and perplexed beyond measure.

But Ezra had quickly disappeared in the surrounding brush. For over three hours Fred kept up the hunt without success.

"This is the worst luck yet!" muttered the youth, as, thoroughly tired out, he found himself in a little clearing near a spring. "What is the use of my going to Oil Ridge when the papers are gone? Who will take my word for it that the highly respected Ezra Darston is the thief? If I made a charge against him, the chances are they would throw me into jail."

Utterly discouraged, the young wheelman walked to the foot of a tree and sat down on a large, round log, to think the situation over.

CHAPTER XVI.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS.

Soon he heard a noise, and a little while after a rickety farm wagon came into sight on the near-by road, driven by two tall and muscular-looking men.

"Hullo, there?"

"Well, boy, what are ye doin' out here this time o' night, an' what do ye want?"

The farm wagon came to a halt.

In a few words the boy explained matters.

"Robbed, was ye? Well, well!"

"Help me to find the rascal who robbed me and I'll reward you for your trouble."

"We'll go ye on that!"

So the men tied up their team and set out with Fred to find some trace of the rascal, but not a trace of Ezra Darston could be discovered.

"Take me to Oil Ridge without delay," then urged the boy.

The men readily agreed, and at three o'clock in the morning Oil Ridge was reached.

Fred lost no time in hunting up the land-owner.

"Yes, I have secured the land I was after," he said, in reply to the youth's question. "Now, what is the trouble?"

His story, from beginning to end, was narrated.

"What rascals—the lot of them!" Arlington muttered. "Fred, it would seem as if our fortunes were to be thrown together; for, unless I am greatly mistaken, Ezra Darston is also the man who is directing this secret attack against me."

"That, now, is my idea, sir."

"I presume Ezra Darston thinks his respectability will carry him through. He will swear that he actually does not know a single man of the crowd under him."

"Can you tell me anything about the Little Diamond mine?"

"Yes, I know all about it. It is situated about fifty miles east of here, and is run under the name of the Rough and Ready mine."

"And who is supposed to be the proprietor?"

"Ezra Darston."

"And that was my father's!"

"It looks so. If I had those maps I could tell you more, for the Little Diamond is placed on one of them."

"Why not go back to the burnt district and try to find the maps?" urged the young wheelman.

"And what will you do?"

"Go back with you, in hopes of meeting Darston on the road."

"He will probably keep out of sight."

"Then I'll follow him over to Grainville."

"That's right! And, another thing, why not have that old woman, Mammy Quay, arrested? She may make some confession which will be a great help to you."

"I was thinking I might scare her into saying something."

An hour was spent in discussing the situation.

By noon the two friends were ready to start.

Both had their bicycles, but rode on the stage as far as Danville.

The next morning found them once more in the burnt territory.

All day they hunted around, but without success, and they concluded that Pete Whipple and his gang had left the vicinity.

Toward nightfall they reached a beautiful spot on the banks of the mountain torrent.

"An ideal camping spot!" exclaimed Arlington. "We may as well remain here to-night."

"Some one else has chosen this for a camp," exclaimed the Flyer, as he pointed a short distance away to where lay the blackened remains of a fire.

He walked in the direction indicated, but had scarcely taken a dozen steps when he uttered a loud cry and held up an elastic band, very broad and containing several spots of ink upon one side.

"An elastic band!" ejaculated Arlington. "Let me examine it." He took the object. "The very same! It is the one I placed around the maps!"

"Then the gang must be in the vicinity, unless—hullo!"

Fred stopped short, and, running forward, picked up several bits of writing paper, on which, in lead pencil, words were traced.

"A message of some sort. Let us see if we can't patch the pieces of paper together."

A half hour was spent in finding some missing bits and in forming a perfect whole.

The message could then be easily read. It filled man and boy with astonishment, for it said:

"Pete Whipple: Bring all the gang to the Red Mountain Cave on the tenth. Matters of great importance."

"THE BOSS."

"The tenth!" cried Arlington. "To-day is the ninth. The meeting is then to take place to-morrow."

"Where is the Red Mountain Cave?"

"Red Mountain is over yonder, a distance of ten miles. The cave must be somewhere on the south side."

"The boss," mused the boy. "This note must have been written by Darston."

"Right, my boy. Matters appear to be coming to a head."

"What do you advise, sir?"

Arlington thought for a few moments.

"I wonder if you could do it?" he then queried.

"Do what, sir?"

"Over there lies Pine Valley. The sheriff of Pine County is an old friend of mine. If I could get word to him he would come out here at the head of a band of officers and round these rascals up in great shape."

"Can I, by hard riding, get there in time?"

"I think so. If you'll undertake to go, I'll stay around Red Mountain and keep watch for the gang until your return."

So it was agreed, and ten minutes later the Flyer started on a trip that was destined to be the most exciting and surprising he had ever yet undertaken.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DEATH-BED REVELATION.

Soon Flyer Fred was bowling along at his best long-stretch pace. Mile after mile was covered, and still he did not

slacken his speed, for he was determined to cover the largest possible distance ere the darkness should render rapid wheeling dangerous.

About ten o'clock, when it was so dark under the trees he could scarcely see, he noticed in the distance a faint light.

He moved upon it slowly until he discovered that it streamed from the front window of a coal-miner's cottage, the abode being one of a number nestling in a little hamlet under a gigantic cliff.

"I'll get some oil for my lamp," he thought, and wheeled up to the door without delay.

A cry arose from within when he knocked.

"It must be the doctor at last!"

"Let him in quick, Jenny; there's no time to spare if her life is to be saved!"

Then the door was thrown open and a girl of fifteen appeared.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, falling back. "Mother, it's not the doctor at all! It's a young man on a bicycle!"

"Too bad!" replied the woman, coming forward. "And what can I do for you this time of night, sir?"

"I wish a little oil for my lamp, if you can spare some."

"Certainly we can do that. Oh, dear! I thought you were Doctor Rolling."

"You are then awaiting a doctor?"

"Yes. A terrible crime has been committed. My aunt was stabbed by an unknown man not an hour ago."

Fred was immediately interested.

"What was the cause, robbery?"

"I think not. The man was masked. He came and quarreled with my aunt, and then he stabbed her. She is dying in the next room—and all of the men folks away, too!"

"I'll get the doctor, if it's on my way. I am bound for Pine Valley on an urgent mission."

"Yes, the doctor lives—ah, here he comes!"

As she finished a man clattered up on horseback and leaped to the ground. He was followed by several others, who had heard of the dastardly attack.

"A woman stabbed, I understand?" said the doctor.

"Yes, sir."

"Who is it?" and the medical man forced his way through the crowd into the house.

"An old aunt of mine called Mammy Quay. She is a bit queer in her head and used to live in Brightsburgh."

At this revelation the Flyer could scarcely believe his ears.

"Mammy Quay?" he gasped.

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"I do, but—but—"

He had no time to finish.

"That voice! That voice!" shrieked some one from the adjoining room. "Who is that boy? I must see him before I die!"

The speaker was Mammy Quay!

She had just returned to consciousness and had recognized Fred's voice.

"She wants you!" exclaimed the woman of the house. "What can it mean?"

"Send him in! It is Richard Farley's son; I feel sure of it! Heaven has sent him at this time, when I am about to die!"

Without waiting Fred entered the bed-chamber. Mammy Quay rested on a narrow bed, her forehead and throat wrapped in several blood-soaked bandages.

"I knew it! I knew it! Come here Fred. You are the one I want to see!"

"But, aunt, here is the doctor!" remonstrated the woman of the house.

"The doctor can do me no good. I am dying; I feel it."

"I may be able to help you, madam," said the physician. "Will you kindly allow me to make an examination?"

"Yes, you can do that; but the boy—stay here, Fred Farley."

The doctor set to work. But a brief examination told him that Mammy Quay's hours, nay, minutes, were numbered.

The old woman watched him narrowly.

"Ye see I can't live?" she asked.

"It is a serious case, but—"

"Tell the truth, man! I won't mind it. How long can I last?"

"Perhaps a day—"

"And perhaps a good deal less, eh? I know I'll not see the sun rise again. Fred Farley, come here!"

"If you'll not excite yourself, madam—"

"I have a duty to perform, doctor. Come in, Mary and Jenny, and you, doctor, hear me, too. I'll not die with the burden of a secret on my soul. When we met before, do you remember what I told you, Frederick?"

"You told me to beware of Ezra Darston."

"Aye, that's it; beware of Ezra Darston! And why did I tell ye that? Because he is a liar, a thief, and a murderer!"

The old woman gave a gasp, as if to faint.

Liquor was at once given her, then her black eyes began to snap as of old.

"Ezra Darston thinks himself safe, but these wounds are his work, although which one of his tools did the deed I don't know. He was your father's executor, and he robbed you out of hundreds of thousands of dollars. He is—water, quick, I can't breathe. Give me air!"

There was a pause. Mammy Quay raised herself up on one arm. The water was brought, but she pushed it aside.

"It's too late; I'm sinking. Fred Farley, listen, all of ye! Richard Farley lost his life on the railroad, but not by accident. I saw the deed, and was well paid to keep silent, but I'll not keep silent any longer. Richard Farley stood on the high bank at Radley's Switches when the express came along. Ezra Darston crept up behind him and pushed him over into the cut! Ezra Darston murdered Richard Farley; I swear it! Pete Whipple can tell the same—"

A gasp, a gurgle, a vain attempt to go on, and Mammy Quay fell back upon the bed—dead!

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE NICK OF TIME—VICTORIOUS FLYER.

Flyer Fred was deeply affected by the old woman's startling confession and astounding revelation.

Ezra Darston had murdered his father! For what reason? To rob the heir of his rich inheritance, the Little Diamond Mine!

"Who is this Ezra Darston she mentioned?" asked the doctor.

"A lawyer of Grainville."

"I know him," put in the woman of the house. "I saw him riding through this village but a few hours ago."

"You saw him!" cried the boy.

"I did; I am sure of it; he was riding down the Red Mountain road. Another man was with him—a tall fellow, with a scar on his left ear."

"Bob Bolten!" muttered Fred. He turned to the doctor.

"Sir, you heard this dead woman's confession?"

"I did; I have the main points down in writing."

"You will stand ready to testify against that rascal if he is run down?"

"Most assuredly. It would be criminal not to do so."

"Then that is all I ask. Now I must be off for Pine Valley to get the sheriff. This Ezra Darston is at the head of a lawless gang, and it is my intention to have them rounded up at their next meeting place. Good-night to all of you!"

The Flyer left the house. His lamp was filled with oil, and on he went on his lonely midnight ride to Pine Valley.

As he pedalled on his face grew dark and full of determination.

"So he killed my father! He shall suffer for that—I swear it!"

On and on and still on spurred the silent steed, up hill and down, and flashing like a meteor along long stretches of smooth road.

"It shall be a life for a life! I will not spare him!" were his thoughts.

Midnight was past and still he went on. There was a long rise to climb that took all of an hour. Nearly exhausted, he at last reached the hill crest.

Far away across the hills he could see flickering lights—the lights from the homes in Pine Valley!

"Oh, that I were there!"

Not long did he stop to rest. A look at the wheel, to make sure all was right, and he started on the long down grade. His feet were up on the coasters, and forward he went, every yard covered adding to his speed.

It was a perilous ride in the gloom of night. Had he struck a stone he might have been flung to his death.

And now came the end of the hill, and he went with a rush through the little valley and across the rough timber bridge. One more hill and the outskirts of the town would be at hand!

The second climb took all of his breath. More than once he was on the point of dropping in a state of collapse. But grit was there, and he kept on!

The top of the last hill now! No more hard pushing, and it was time, for he was deadly pale and panting heavily. A shove and the bicycle shot down the other side, drawing rapidly nearer to Pine Valley.

Only half a mile more! The lights from a number of homes could be seen distinctly. A tower bell rang out solemnly—three o'clock.

With a whirr the bicycle passed through a copse and out in the open. Then came a sharp turn and then—merciful heavens!

With a crash the machine struck a hollow filled with mud and loose stones. Flyer Fred tried to save himself, but in vain. Over he went, and flying through the air, struck a tree with his head and tumbled back into the road as one dead!

"Hark! What is that sound that breaks the midnight stillness? Verily, 'tis a wheelman, and at this unseemly hour doth he come to disturb the slumbers of Booth Shakespeare Hawkins! Ha, he cometh this way, and—"

The old ex-actor paused in amazement. He saw the rush, the catastrophe and in a moment was at Fred's side, examining the motionless form.

"My friend!" he cried in amazement. "Now have I a chance to return the good he did me, and I will return it, aye, thrice over, for he is a manly boy."

He ran for water and bathed the youth's face, and chafed his hands. His vigorous work was soon rewarded, for Fred opened his eyes and stared vacantly around him.

"Where am I? What happened?" he asked.

"You've been riding like a wizard, my son," began Booth Hawkins, when, of a sudden, he was amazed to see Fred arise and stagger to his wheel. "Where bound? Stop! stop!"

"I cannot! I must get to Pine Valley without delay!"

"But you cannot ride. You are wounded, you—by George! He's off! A Spartan, every inch of him!"

The old ex-actor was right; wounded, dazed, half-dead, Fred continued on his way. His wheel swayed from side to side; every movement of a foot was full of pain. But he did not mind. There was not an instant of time to spare. The town was reached ten minutes later, and in a broken voice he asked his way to the sheriff's home.

A loud knock brought that official to an upper window.

"Who is there?"

"Fred Farley, sir. I bring message from Brycomb Arlington—something important."

Sheriff Larmer waited to hear no more. Slipping into his clothing, he came down and admitted his visitor.

Fred's story was soon told; then the sheriff lost no time in gathering half a dozen trusty followers. While this was being done he ordered refreshments for his guest; but the boy could not eat; could only swallow a cup of strong coffee and that was all.

"Will you go back with us?" asked the sheriff. "Are you strong enough?"

"Yes," was the steady response. "I will go back. I can easily keep up with your horses on my machine."

The start was made at early dawn. Each man was armed, for all felt that an important engagement was at hand. The men were well aware that Pete Whipple and the other desperadoes would not give up without a tough struggle.

The sun was high and hot in the heavens when the vicinity of the Red Mountains was reached. The sheriff knew every foot of the ground, and led the way from one trail to another with the boy wheelman close beside him.

Presently they found themselves close to the base of a high cliff. As they rode on the sheriff warned all to be in readiness with their firearms.

"The cave spoken of in the note can't be far off," he explained. "And when we—hark!"

He drew rein and all listened. From a distance came a faint cry for help.

"It is Mr. Arlington's voice!" exclaimed Fred. "It came from the top of the cliff and I—look! look!"

He pointed upward. There, on the very edge of the cliff struggled Brycomb Arlington and Ezra Darston! The lawyer had a dagger in his hand and was in the act of forcing the land speculator over to his death below!

"Stop! Up with your hands, Ezra Darston!"

The command came from Flyer Fred.

He had pressed close up under where the two men were in deadly combat. The lawyer saw him and uttered a snarl of rage. Then, of a sudden, he caught Arlington by the throat and attempted to hurl him down to his death, but—

Crack!

The pistol of Fred rang out sharply, and Darston, thief and murderer, fell

back upon the top of the cliff, shot through the heart.

"Revenged!" cried Flyer Fred. Then the last of his strength forsook him and he knew no more.

When the young Flyer came to his senses he found himself on a temporary couch at the entrance to a large cavern. Mr. Arlington stood over him.

"Brave boy!" murmured the land owner. "You saved my life! I shall never forget you for that!"

"And Ezra Darston?" asked Fred, in a whisper.

"Dead, by your hand, Frederick!"

"What of the others? Did they escape?"

"No. Pete Whipple is also dead—killed by the sheriff—and all the others are prisoners."

For the time being the boy said no more. He sank back semi-unconscious, and it was not until the next day that he was able to leave his couch.

The party with their prisoners and dead returned to Pine Valley. The body of Ezra Darston was shipped to Grainville, while that of Whipple was buried in an unknown grave.

Great was the surprise when the truth concerning Richard Farley's death became known. Plans were made to arrest Uriah Whop as his accomplice, but the farmer one evening left for parts unknown. Caleb Darston also disappeared. The rest of the gang were duly sent to State's prison.

Through the work of Brycomb Arlington, Flyer Fred readily acquired the large fortune that was coming to him. The land speculator was appointed his nominal guardian until he should become of age. But Arlington did no more than to advise the bright boy in the management of the great property that came to him.

Old Booth Hawkins and others who had befriended the Flyer were not forgotten, and to-day Fred has a host of friends, all of whom are ready to declare him to be not only the champion cyclist, but the keenest ferret of the country.

THE END.

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